

Parliament votes for immunity

The new People's Assembly, acting with surprising speed, turned down a Justice Ministry request to lift the parliamentary immunity of five of its members. Gamal Essam El-Din reports

At its first sitting on Saturday, the new People's Assembly debated, and then rejected, a request by Justice Minister Farouk Seif El-Nasr to strip five of its members of their parliamentary immunity so that they could be investigated — four for alleged financial irregularities and the fifth for suspected murder. But the Assembly, acting on the recommendation of its constitutional and legislative committee, allowed the five deputies to testify before prosecution officials. Parliamentary rules require that the Assembly's permission be sought before MPs can answer prosecution questions.

Referring to the four accused of financial malpractice, committee chairman Mohamed Moussa said that investigating the misuse of public funds usually takes a long time, up to three or four years. "A deputy could not be left without immunity for such a long time... But if the prosecution decides to put them on trial, we can lift their immunity in a minute. We are not using immunity to protect anyone," he insisted.

The four who are suspected of misappropriating public funds are Tawfiq Abdou Ismail, Khaled Hamed Mahmoud, Mahmoud Azzam and Ibrahim Aglan. The fifth, who is a suspect in the investigation of the murder of two men during the recent parliamentary elections, is Ahmed Fouad Abaza.

The case of the four came to public attention in August, when the Administrative Control Authority submitted a report to the prosecutor general claiming that a group of businessmen, including Mahmoud Azzam, a private contractor, Khaled Hamed Mahmoud, the son of a former minister of local administration, Yassin Abdel-Fattah Aglan, a Bahari governorate businessman, and Mohamed Kamel Mustafa Elba, a public contractor, used forged documents to obtain large loans from the Commercial Bank of Daqahliya and Al-Nil Bank without collateral.

Azzam's wife, Aleya El-Ayouti, is vice-president of Al-Nil Bank. According to the report, Azzam took advantage of his wife's position to obtain loans amounting to LE179 million without notifying the bank's board of directors or listing the loans in the bank's books.

The report alleged that Tawfiq Abdou Ismail, chairman of the outgoing Assembly's plan and budget committee (also re-elected for this session) and chairman of the Commercial Bank of Daqahliya, and Ibrahim Aglan, a member of the bank's board, provided Yassin Aglan, Ibrahim's brother, with more than LE200 million in loans, also without collateral and against the payment of hefty commissions.

The prosecutor sent the Administrative Control Authority's report to the outgoing Assembly and also requested the Central Bank of Egypt to investigate the actions of the two banks. The outgoing Assembly reacted by lifting the immunity of Azzam, Mahmoud and Ismail, who were deputies at the time. In the recent parliamentary elections, these three, plus Ibrahim Aglan, managed to win seats in the new Assembly. After taking the constitutional oath, they asked for the Assembly's permission to testify before prosecution officials.

But on 17 December, the minister of justice, acting on a request by the prosecutor general, sent a report to the new Assembly requesting that the four deputies be stripped of their immunity. With surprising speed, Assembly Speaker Ahmed Fathi Sorour referred the minister's report to the Assembly's legislative and constitutional committee on the same day. And it was put on the agenda of the Assembly's first sitting last Saturday, 30 December.

Zakaria Azmi, MP for Cairo's Al-Zeitoun district and chief of the presidential staff, triggered a heated debate when he criticised the legislative and constitutional committee's report and said it did not provide convincing reasons for its refusal to lift the four deputies' immunity. He predicted that their immunity would have to be lifted eventually. Committee chairman Moussa retorted that one of the four, Ismail, had travelled abroad more than once during the past three months without any objection from the prosecutor.

Khaled Mahmoud, another of the four, objected to the fact that Azmi "seemed so sure that our immunity will be lifted in the end, although the prosecutor-general has stated more than once that the report did not amount to a direct accusation against us. Unless," Mahmoud added, "Azmi knows something which we don't know," Azmi denied being in the possession of secret information.

Sameh Ashour, a Nasserist deputy, triggered another heated debate when he accused the committee, of which he is a member, of devoting greater attention to the four deputies' request to testify before prosecution officials than to the request for the removal of their immunity. "This could make it easy for certain people to cover up their activities," Ashour said. Angered by these words, Tawfiq Abdou Ismail responded that neither he nor the three others "needed the protection of parliamentary immunity because we have full confidence in the justice system." He added that "the people demonstrated their support for us in the recent elections."

Pointing out that the four had requested the Assembly's permission to testify before prosecution officials, Ismail charged that certain authorities — an allusion to the Administrative Control Authority — had acted against Egypt's interest by defaming the good names of honourable people.

The Assembly, after authorising the four to testify before prosecution officials, then debated another report by its legislative and constitutional committee on the case of Ahmed Fouad Abaza, MP for the Sharqiya district of Abu Hamad. The committee also turned down the justice minister's request to strip him of his parliamentary immunity on the grounds that the request was not backed by documents on the case filed against Abaza, as required by the Assembly's regulations. The committee authorised Abaza to testify before prosecution officials.

Yassin Serageldin, leader of the Wafd Party's parliamentary group, backed the committee's report, but Abdel-Abad Gamaleddin, chairman of the Assembly's proposals and complaints committee, objected to it. He said that the constitution intended parliamentary immunity as a protection for MPs in the discharge of their parliamentary duties. Abaza, however, "was caught red-handed and a police order was issued remanding him in custody for 15 days."

According to the prosecutor's report, Abaza was caught on 7 December inside his car, with an automatic rifle and 24 bullets, inciting his supporters to interfere in the vote-counting process. Earlier, the report said, Abaza was suspected of shooting and killing two people, Ahmed Mohamed Youssef and Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed, in a polling station. He was also said to have fired bullets at a number of ballot boxes in an attempt to have the votes inside invalidated.

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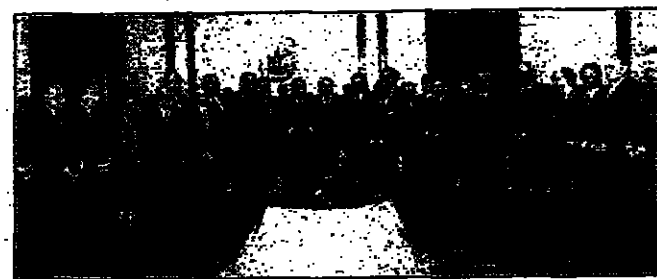
Mubarak, in a press conference, announces his decision to charge El-Ganzouri with forming a new cabinet



Sidki submitting his government's resignation to Mubarak



Sidki (r) and El-Ganzouri (l) at Sidki's cabinet's final session



A memorial photo of the outgoing cabinet

Forging ahead

PRESIDENT Hosni Mubarak announced, at a hastily-arranged news conference Tuesday night, that he had designated Deputy Prime Minister Kamal El-Ganzouri to form a new cabinet, replacing the administration of Atef Sidki. While stressing that the move did not signal a change in state policy, Mubarak said the task of the new cabinet would be to lead the nation into the 21st century. "I want

to give a push to national action in various spheres", he said. "There are certain objectives which any cabinet, whether the outgoing cabinet or the new cabinet, must pursue."

Asked whether Sidki's resignation meant a change in state policy, Mubarak said: "Our policy will never change." The government's primary target, he continued, was to alleviate the economic burdens of low-income groups and raise their

standard of living. "Cabinets may change but our objectives do not. The task of the new cabinet is to activate this process and give it a push." He told reporters that economic reform and privatisation would continue, describing them as "unavoidable". Asked whether he planned to appoint a vice-president, Mubarak replied: "God willing."

Architect of economic reform

AS DEPUTY prime minister and minister of planning, Kamal El-Ganzouri has been one of the architects of the economic reform programme and the shift to a market economy, which was launched in the mid-1980s. Ganzouri, who was designated by President Hosni Mubarak on Tuesday night to form a new cabinet, has led Egyptian negotiators in several rounds of talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in-

sisting that the reform programme should be tailored to Egypt's national interests. He put up strong opposition to the IMF's demand for the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, and eventually won.

Ganzouri, 63, graduated from Cairo University's Faculty of Agriculture and later travelled to the United States to obtain a doctorate in economics from Michigan University. In the 1970s he was governor of the New Valley

and later Beni Suef governorates, before being appointed as director of the National Planning Institute. He held his first cabinet post, as minister of planning and international cooperation, in 1982, and was elevated to deputy prime minister and minister of planning in 1987.

When he was summoned by Mubarak to form a new cabinet, Ganzouri was busy working on the nation's third five-year economic

development plan, to be launched in 1997. He divided economic reform into three stages: renovating the infrastructure and the instruments of production, which has been achieved in the first and second development plans; financial discipline, which was enforced in the latter half of the second plan; and a massive increase of production, which is the target of the third plan.

Poll monitors argue their merits

The recent parliamentary elections were monitored by local human rights groups for the first time, but were those groups qualified for the job? Khaled Dawoud investigates

Since the birth of the Egyptian human rights movement in 1985, local activists have focused their attention on such occurrences as arbitrary arrests, disappearances, allegations of prison torture and attacks on the freedom of expression. Monitoring parliamentary elections appeared to be outside their scope.

But spurred on by economist Said El-Naggar, chairman of the New Civic Forum, and sociology professor Saadeddin Ibrahim, director of the Ibn Khaldoun Centre for Development Studies, six human rights groups and research centres decided a few weeks before the 29 November elections to set up an election-watch body.

The team's field work was divided among some of the participating groups, while others contributed legal studies. As election day approached, the various groups issued reports on different kinds of alleged violations. More reports were issued after election day and also after the 6 December second round runoffs. But although the groups were supposed to be working together under the umbrella of the election-watch committee, an informed source, who was involved in the preparations, conceded that there had been a lack of coordination among the groups.

"It is difficult to make a full assessment of the experiment because it was a first", commented Amir Salem, director of a human rights legal studies centre. "But I felt that some of the participating organisations were more concerned with attracting media attention and getting their names in the headlines of the opposition newspapers." However, he was quick to acknowledge that "a great effort was made and the results were very useful."

Another human rights research centre director, who asked that his name be withheld, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that his group did not take part in the election-watch committee's work because of the late start in preparations. "We met for the first time one month before the elections and were asked to prepare for the job," he said. "But it was impossible at such short notice." He added that several people warned that the delay could influence the committee's credibility.

According to this director, the late start meant that field workers were not provided with adequate training — a fact which was readily admitted by the majority of the directors of the participating human rights groups. Most of them, including the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) which issued its final

100-page report last week, provided their field workers with as little as one day's training.

But the same director said that his reservations were not an attempt to belittle the great efforts that had been made. "I have learned of some cases where human rights activists jeopardised their lives because they insisted on monitoring elections in very hot constituencies," he said. The reports issued by the human rights groups not only angered the government, but also some opposition forces and independents, particularly the leftist Tagammu Party, which was accused of violations.

The EOHR charged that Tagammu leader Khaled Mohieddin collaborated with local authorities to ensure his victory and was involved in vote-rigging in his Qalyubia constituency of Kafr Shukr. "That was a scandal," said EOHR Secretary-General Negad El-Bora'i. "When the opposition, and not only the government, takes part in vote-rigging, it means there is a big problem with the whole system."

But other human rights activists questioned the credibility of the EOHR itself, with one of them claiming that the group amounted to little more than a branch of the Nasserist Party. This claim, he said, was

corroborated by the fact that Nasserists packed a recent EOHR general assembly, convened to elect a new board for the organisation, with supporters. Many of these supporters had no human rights interests.

Bora'i, a former member of the Nasserist Party's political bureau, rejected this accusation, insisting that he was a "liberal".

Hisham Mubarak, director of the Human Rights Legal Aid Centre, one of the groups involved in the committee, conceded that Mohieddin's case could have been blown out of proportion, particularly if it was compared to violations committed by National Democratic Party candidates and independents. "We should take the general context into consideration when we prepare our reports," he warned.

Mubarak described the election-watch experiment as "very useful," first because it set a precedent, and also because it had produced trained groups who would be able to do a better job in similar situations in the future.

He denied that the committee's work had got off to a late start, and said that his own group began preparations well ahead of the elections, issuing six short booklets, and informing voters, candidates, candidate

representatives and polling officials of their rights and duties. He said his centre printed 200,000 copies of those booklets.

Also rejecting the argument that field workers lacked training, Mubarak said that many of them were lawyers and journalists who had a good knowledge of the voting system and who had witnessed previous elections in 1984, 1987 and 1990.

And to minimise the possibility that election monitors might be influenced by their own political affiliations, a special form was prepared with very specific questions about the election process. Each monitor had to manage to complete the form without expressing an opinion, Mubarak said.

"Those accusing the human rights groups of doing a bad job are angry because of the large number of violations which were exposed by our reports," he said. "But I actually believe that some of these reports were rather mild, and that more violations could have been revealed."

Proof of the reports' accuracy, he continued, came with administrative court rulings that the election results in over 100 constituencies were null and void because of vote-rigging. The government is contesting the rulings before higher courts.

Rail chief sacked

Following a series of train crashes, claiming dozens of lives, President Mubarak ordered the dismissal of the chief of the national railway authority. Dina Ezzat reports

President Hosni Mubarak on Saturday asked Atef Sidki, then prime minister, to replace the director of the national railway authority, following a series of train crashes that killed more than 60 people in the last two weeks of 1995. As a result, Abdel-Salam Shaath was dismissed from the post and replaced by Mahmoud Marei, an under-secretary at the Ministry of Transport.

The worst crash, gruesome pictures of which made the front pages of national newspapers, occurred on 21 December, when a speeding train carrying railway workers slammed into the back of a passenger train which had stopped in foggy weather at Al-Badrashin station, about 20km south of Cairo. At least 64 people were killed and 67 wounded. The force of the collision hurled three cars of the passenger train, which was heading from Cairo to Assiut, on top of the other train, and caused other cars to derail. Rescue workers battled to free passengers trapped in the tangled wreckage and ambulances took the casualties to nearby hospitals. According to a report by the railway authority, financial damage was es-

timated at LE5 million.

Twenty-four hours later, two cargo trains, one carrying construction material and the other railway spare parts, collided near Aswan. There were no casualties, but the collision disrupted railway traffic between Cairo and Aswan for eight hours and cost the railway authority another heavy financial loss.

Then, on 30 December, a passenger train speeding from Al-Minya to Cairo crashed into the rear of another train that was moving in the same direction and on the same tracks. The driver of the speeding train was killed and 10 passengers were wounded.

In a statement to parliament, Transport Minister Sufiwan Metwalli blamed the failure of train drivers to abide by the safety rules and maximum speed regulations. In the case of the Badrashin tragedy, Metwalli said the driver of the rear train was moving at 140km per hour, violating the maximum speed limit, and jumped two red lights before slamming into the stationary train. Worse, the driver had disconnected an "automatic control device" which would have forced the train to stop at

the sight of a red light signal.

Despite the advanced technology used by the railway authority, Metwalli said, the possibility of human error could not be eradicated completely. "A quick review of the statistics of train accidents over the last 15 years shows a significant drop in their number," Metwalli said. "In 1981, there were 490 accidents, but by 1995 the number had dropped to 89. In other words, there used to be a weekly average of 10 accidents which has now dropped to two."

Metwalli seized the opportunity to talk about the large sums of money that have been allocated to upgrading the railway service during the past 15 years. He promised that the coming weeks will witness more extensive training courses for drivers to improve their skills and greater supervision to make sure that drivers abide by the authority's regulations. Immediately after taking office, Mahmoud Marei, the authority's new chairman, held a series of meetings with the authority's top officials. "He

wants to pinpoint the problem", an assistant said. "He is determined to introduce a new working system."

But to everybody's dismay, only 24 hours after Marei assumed his new responsibilities, yet another railway accident occurred. A train derailed and some of its cars overturned in adjacent fields as the driver was attempting to halt the train in a siding in Giza. There were no casualties.

And on the first day of 1996, an empty train caught fire at Cairo's main station and the fire brigade was brought in to extinguish the blaze.

And yet these successive accidents have not deterred passengers from using the train service, with 1,600 daily trips covering the nation's 26 governorates. During the past few days, Cairo's Ramses Station has been busier and more crowded than usual. People celebrating the new year or making plans for Coptic Christmas and the mid-term school holidays have been mass-booked train tickets to the governorates of Upper and

Lower Egypt, according to a station clerk. The cheerful faces of many passengers, going on holiday, travelling to visit family and friends, or sight-

seeing, suggested that the horrific crashes would not deter people from depending on Egypt's most popular means of long-distance transport.

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Edited by Wadie Kirolos

Pride and profit

Employee share ownership programmes may yield positive results, but, say legal and management experts, some problems still exist within the system. **Sherine Abdel-Razek reports**

For 35 years, at the end of every workday, Qad El-Rab Taha, a driver at a public sector company, used to leave the company car at the garage without even bothering to wash it. But a year after joining the company's Employee Shareholders' Association (ESA), Taha, 55, now checks the car's gas, oil and water supply daily, and covers it before leaving the company garage every afternoon.

"I feel now that it is my own car, that I have a stake in the company. Any breakdown would hold up the company, and in turn affect my profits," he said.

This turnaround in Taha's attitude is shared by all the Egyptian Real Estate Company's (EREC) employees, who now own 95 per cent of the firm. Selling public sector company shares to employee share holding associations is one method of privatisation increasingly gaining ground and bringing about positive results. The system enables employees to be *de facto* owners of public sector companies by buying stakes in the ESA, which, in turn, purchases shares on behalf of its members. On retirement, the employees sell their stake in the ESA back to the association at market value. A percentage of the ESA's stakes are withheld for new workers who might like to join in the future.

As a result of this system, employees also assume the role of shareholders concerned with boosting production and minimising costs. And, at the end of each year, members of ESAs receive a dual share of company profits, both as shareholders and as employees.

The formation of ESAs was made possible by the Capital Market Law issued in 1992. Legislative Counselor Mahmoud Fahmy, a principal author of the law, pointed out that although ESAs have long existed around the world, it was only with

Law 95 that they took root in Egypt. The law provided a legal umbrella for these associations. In 1986, recalls Fahmy, prior to the law, there were attempts to give employees 30 per cent of the shares of the Alexandria Tire Company, a public sector company in the process of being established. However, such efforts proved futile in the absence of a law, he said.

Since 1992, the number of ESAs registered with the Capital Market Authority has reached 261, and while some have not developed into anything more than plans on paper, others have succeeded in encouraging employee ownership. However, according to Fahmy, even the most active ESAs have been confronted with problems.

One major problem has been providing employees with financing to buy company shares. Various companies have sorted out financing problems individually, using undistributed profits or providing credit lines for employees and deducting instalments from employee paychecks monthly.

However, points out Fahmy, borrowing from the banks is one source of financing which remains limited due to the absence of incentives for the banks to provide such loans. He said that the 'Unified Companies' Law, which is currently being



drafted, also offers solutions for the financing of employee shares. The law permits employees to pay for the shares in instalments for up to 10 years. It also grants a 20 per cent discount on share prices to employees who are already ESA members, and gives tax incentives to banks to

encourage them to grant loans to ESAs.

One of the most prominent examples of ESAs are those formed at the affiliates of the Holding Company for Public Works and Land Reclamation (HCPWLR). ESAs bought 95 per cent of the shares of 10 of the holding company's 11 sub-

sidaries.

However, according to the HCPWLR's Chairman, Abdel-Ghani Hassan, making the ESA work is not an easy task. It usually entails a number of problems including educating workers to their rights and liabilities, raising funds to buy shares, and setting up the framework of the ESA itself.

Among the obstacles, securing financing seems to be the most difficult to overcome. In an attempt to solve this problem the holding company had to intervene, said Hassan. "The holding company itself paid for the shares bought by the ESAs in its affiliates using undistributed profits, and the ESAs will have to pay the loan back in instalments over a three-to-ten year period at an 8 per cent interest rate," Hassan explained. The first instalment is due in March 1996 and the shares are mortgaged to the holding company until its value is completely paid.

Evaluating the experience, Hassan said that although ESAs are a feasible method of privatisation, they can only succeed in profit-making companies, as company profits are one of the major sources of financing the purchase of shares.

Fatma Khattab, of Arthur Anderson's Partnership in Development Project, has been delegated to head the privatisation

unit in the HCPWLR. She agrees that forming ESAs was initially an uphill struggle.

"We had a hard time convincing workers of the idea of establishing ESAs," she said.

At the beginning, Khattab said, the employees did not fully understand the idea, and were intimidated by the prospect of having to pay for the shares. They were even apprehensive about being owners of a company which could, theoretically, generate losses at some point in time.

Khattab pointed out that holding companies and ESAs are working closely together — organising workshops and training courses for employees. These policies proved successful, she asserted, and at times, the results were inspiring.

"In one of HCPWLR's affiliates, membership in its ESA jumped from only 20 per cent of the employees to 100 per cent," she noted.

Mohamed Ramadan, secretary general of the ESA formed at the EREC, said that one year after it was set up, the ESA has helped in improving worker performance, an achievement that was reflected in the company's production and profits.

The company's turnover rose by 4.6 per cent during 94/95 while its pretax profits amounted to LE11,593 million, compared to LE8,852 million the previous year.

In addition, said Ramadan, employee ownership of company shares has prompted an increase in the number of working hours and a drop in absentee rates. Share ownership has given the employees a morale boost.

"I feel more secure and enjoy the feeling of being equal to any other employee, including the chairman of the company," said Emile Ibrahim, an office boy at EREC. "We all are shareholders with the same rights and duties."

Market report

New gains for a new year

THE CAPITAL Market celebrated the end of the year with a 1.05 point increase in its index, which closed at 213.95 points for the week ending 28 December. The total volume of trading also increased, reaching LE79.2 million.

End of year festivities, however, were marred by poor performance in the manufacturing sector. Its index fell by 0.46 points to close at 283.96. Shares of the Paints and Chemical Industries lost LE15 per share to level off at LE680, while those of the Misr for Soft Drinks and Food Preservation (Microob) lost LE1.4 per share to close at LE26.6.

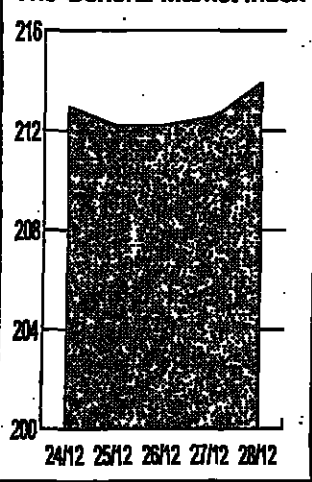
Twelve other manufacturing sector companies, however, witnessed an increase in share value. Among the leaders was the Nile Pharmaceuticals and Chemical Industries Company which gained LE3.5 per share to close at LE53.5. Shares of the Engineering and Architectural Industries Company gained LE0.01 to close at LE4.26.

For financial sector companies, it was a good week. In addition to its index gaining 3.69 points to close at 225.64, it dominated the market in terms of the value of shares traded — LE36.3 million in shares exchanged hands. Shares of the Misr Exterior Bank recorded the greatest increase, almost tripling in value to finally level off at LE505. Trading in the Gulf-Egyptian Bank's shares cornered around 25 per cent of the total number of market transactions. The bank traded 292,900 shares at LE2 per share. The Commercial International Bank's shares lost LE3.25 per share to close at LE508.75. Also declining in value, shares of El-Watany Bank lost LE0.02 per share to close at LE3.5.

For a change, service sector companies also had a good week. The sector's index gained 3.66 points, closing at 136.67 points. Analysts attributed the increase to gains in the value of the Nile Badriwi Hospital's shares. Its stock gained LE45.03 to close at LE945.56 per share.

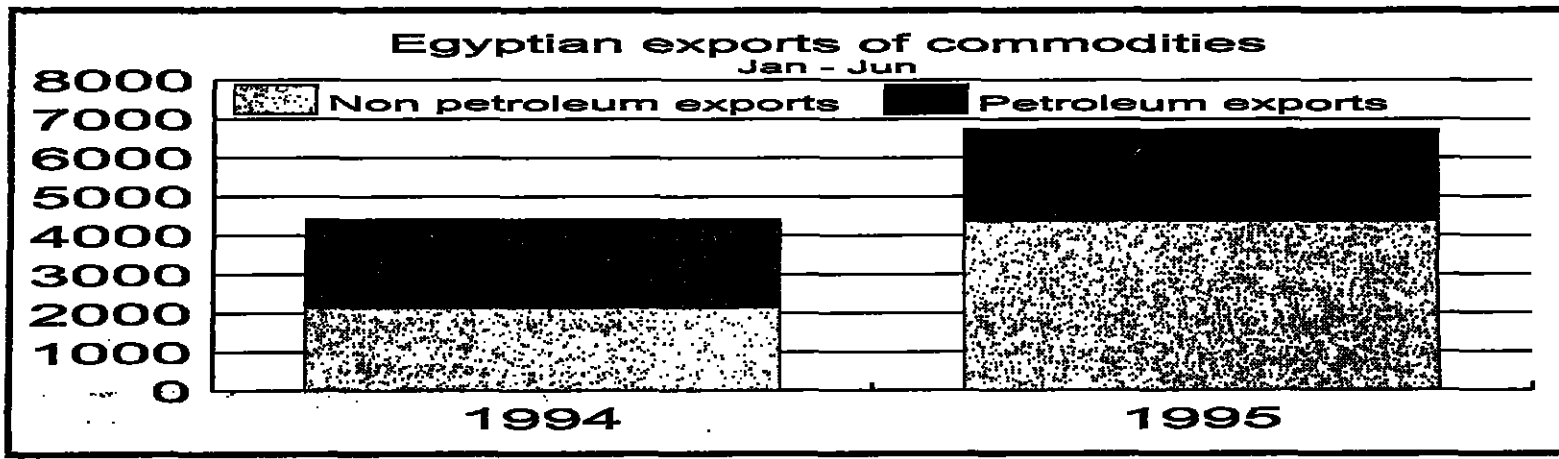
By the end of the week, the shares of 29 companies had increased in value, 28 declined and 53 remained unchanged.

The General Market Index



Recipe for an ailing deficit

The persistence of a balance of trade deficit topping \$8.3 billion in fiscal 94/95 calls for speedy action, experts tell **Mahmoud El-Qassab**



Egypt's economic reform programme may have led to a stable exchange rate, lower inflation and a decline in the budget deficit, but the success of these fiscal and monetary reform policies has been marred by a rapidly increasing balance of trade deficit which, say experts, can only be brought under control by increased productivity and competitiveness.

The trade deficit, which stood at \$7.538 billion in fiscal 1990/91, has shown little sign of decreasing, even after the reform programme was implemented. In fiscal 1994/95, the deficit exceeded \$8.3 billion.

A main reason for this increase, said Hamdi Abdel-Azim, dean of El-Sadat Academy for Administrative Sciences, lies in the fact that industrial production and exports

were not set down as priorities in the first phase of the economic reform programme. The first phase was geared towards monetary and fiscal reforms which aimed at cutting the budget deficit and controlling inflation.

Although the second phase of reforms, launched in 1993, focused on upgrading the industrial sector to enable it to meet the needs of local consumers and produce a surplus for exports, Abdel-Azim maintained that, so far, the government has not been able to realise this goal.

While the current account balance recorded a surplus from 1991 to 1995, this was mainly due to the flow of worker remittances and a surplus in trade of services balance. But, warned Abdel-Azim, these remittances could begin to decline as Arab coun-

tries continue to opt for lower-priced Asian labour in place of Egyptian workers. He argued that a decline in remittances, coupled with a continuous increase in the balance of trade deficit could push the balance of payments once more into a deficit, in turn exerting a downward pressure on the Egyptian pound.

Samir Tobar, head of the National Democratic Party's economic committee, pointed out that commodity exports are more stable sources of foreign currency than tourism and worker remittances which are both affected by uncontrollable political and social events. Petroleum exports, for example, are subject to international oil prices.

But while commodity exports are on the rise, the ever-increasing trade deficit looms ominously on the horizon. "Up

until now, these sources of foreign currency have been rewarding," said Tobar. "However, we cannot guarantee that favourable conditions will prevail in the long run, and therefore, we should take more steps to narrow the trade deficit."

Actions, however, are more difficult than words, and gaining a stronger foothold in international markets will be no easy task, he said. "Understanding foreign markets and consumer taste is a main prerequisite for capturing a large share of international trade," stated Tobar. A step in the right direction, he added, would be for Egypt to hold international fairs that aim to conclude trade deals and not just display products.

In addition, customs and cargo procedures must be revised. "There are too many agencies

that an exporter must deal with," noted Tobar. "Their roles, which are often conflicting, must be re-examined and red tape must be cut in order to encourage exports."

The state, argued Mahmoud El-Arabi, chairman of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, could play a greater role in export promotion as a means to this end. Other countries, he pointed out, like South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand have done this with noteworthy results.

While, concedes El-Arabi, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) precludes direct subsidies for exports, he said that the government should provide indirect subsidies in order to promote exports. "Forms of indirect subsidies include tax exemptions for export-oriented activities, exempting all production equipment from customs tariffs, providing concessional rates of interest for export loans and reducing cargo rates on exports," he said.

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Packaging for all

Modern technology merges with sound planning in the export business. **Mona El-Fiqi reports**

Across from the bustling Cairo Airport, a group of seven investors have pooled their resources and constructed a new International Export Centre (IEC) to cater to the varying needs of Egyptian agricultural export-

The IEC, which is located on a 420,000 sq.m. plot by the airport, is mainly designed to offer support services to exporters through sorting, processing, pre-cooling, packaging and storage facilities for fruit and vegetables.

The centre hopes to provide efficient and speedy services by using modern storage technology to store and preserve produce prior to export," explained Mohamed El-Guindi, executive board member of the IEC.

The centre, which is divided into three compounds, one for administrative work, one for storage and the third for miscellaneous services, boasts the latest technology.

"In the past, it was not poor quality that hampered our exports but packaging. The packaging of a product is very important in attracting customers," El-Guindi said.

Along with freezing units to keep produce fresh, the centre,

which was completed by means of a LE30 million investment by an Egyptian joint stock company, also offers banking, insurance and freight services through specialised companies.

"As the first of its kind in the Middle East, the IEC's facilities ensure that goods are exported according to the highest international standards," he noted.

Ahmed Qassem, a fruit and vegetable exporter added, "Its unique location within the airport grounds assists exporters with the forwarding process."

Headquartered in Alexandria, Qassem often finds himself spending several weeks in Cairo, in need of office space. "The centre provides on-premises offices and conferences for rent to exporters, which are ideal for when I have to meet with clients," he said.

According to Qassem, the centre's services have helped him increase his exports to 2,000 tons, compared to 850 tons last year. "Before the IEC opened, I had to use a packaging station owned by

another exporter. This system is much better."

The financiers of the centre are the Egyptian Investment Projects Co. (SAE), Kato Aromatic Co., the International Land Reclamation and Planting (Hebo), the University Educational Endowment Fund, and the Saudi Corporation for Arab Investment.

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Headline hunting

What will make the news in 1996? *Al-Ahram Weekly* takes a poll on the regional issues expected to make the headlines in the next year

The peace process

Nassif Hiti, assistant secretary-general of the Arab League
The peace process in the Middle East was the most important issue of 1995. I hope that there are developments in 1996 especially on the Syrian track, which is enjoying a new and positive atmosphere that might give it a strong push in 1996. In May of this year there will also be the beginning of the final phase of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. These will tackle vital issues that will put the final touch on the whole process.

Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas spokesman in the Gaza Strip
In 1996 Israel will still hold 70 per cent of Palestinian land in the West Bank and 40 per cent in Gaza. There will never be a full Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian lands, and the issue of Jerusalem is unlikely to be solved. The Israelis may only allow the Palestinians religious supervision of sacred mosques and churches in Jerusalem which is not fair to the Palestinians.

Heba Handoussa, economist and managing director of the Economic Research Forum

The peace process implies both threats and opportunities. It needs a quick response on the part of governments at the macro level: in the manipulation of tariff levels and customs procedures and the reform of institutions.

On the plus side, it is going to improve the competitiveness of countries in the region in attracting foreign investments and transactions. So far the region has attracted about \$2bn a year in foreign direct investment (FDI). When we compare this to a country as small as Malaysia which attracted \$4bn of FDI last year, then we can see the scope for increasing FDI to the region. Political instability is the essential reason why multinationals have been hesitant to come.

Israel

Mohamed Sobehi, secretary-general of the Palestinian National Council

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin underlined how deeply Jewish terrorism is rooted inside and outside Israel. It also shows the importance of fighting extremism and racism in some Jewish circles through halting the financial aid they receive from organisations in the US.

Farouq Abu-Eissa, head of the Arab Lawyers Union
Israel's nuclear threat which Egypt warned of in 1995 is a continuing problem. Israel refused to sign the non-proliferation treaty and this stance puts the whole region at risk. In 1996 the Arabs should make a joint effort to put pressure on Israel to remove this danger.

Iran

Assef Bayati, Iranian sociologist at the American University in Cairo

The Democratic Islamic Movement emerged in Iran, calling for a reconciliation of Islam with modernity and the Islamisation of society and not politics. This movement, if it succeeds, will have an impact on internal politics in Iran as well as the whole region.

Abdel-Moneim Said, Director of Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies

The US boycotted Iran for its alleged attempt to develop its nuclear reactors to serve military purposes. Any development of these reactors will ignite the nuclear arms race in the region, which is contrary to US policy.

Arab reconciliation

Suleiman Awad, minister-plenipotentiary in the Egyptian mission to the UN

Arab reconciliation is another issue that should be addressed in 1996. Last year there were two important attempts, one by the United Arab Emirates' Sheikh Zayed, and the other by the Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid to relieve the sufferings of the Iraqis.

Mahmoud Zahar, Hamas spokesman in the Gaza Strip
I hope that 1996 will witness reconciliation among Arab regimes, especially with Iraq as the Iraqi people are the only victims. Arab governments should be more concerned about the Iraqi people than the shortcomings of the regime.

Borders

Nassif Hiti, assistant secretary-general of the Arab League

The (demarcation) of borders is a problem that will continue into 1996. The problem of borders among Arab countries should be politically addressed, otherwise it will have negative consequences for the region.

Economic prospects

Heba Handoussa, managing director of the Economic Research Forum

The most important event of 1995 was the negotiations with the European Union over trade agreements. It is a splendid opportunity for various countries to take advantage of. But it also poses many challenges in terms of our own market in the Middle East which could be taken over by European firms. The cost will be very high if we do not rationalise our industries.

Farouq Abu-Eissa, head of the Arab Lawyers Union

Low-income groups will suffer from a drop in their standard of living. The gap between social classes will widen. This will threaten social stability. The gap is a result of the economic policies in the region imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. It is also due to the insistence of the North in exerting control over the South.

Western Sahara

Suleiman Awad, minister-plenipotentiary of the Egyptian mission to the UN

The problem of the Western Sahara will impose itself as an important issue in 1996. The UN under secretary-general will hold talks with the parties concerned with the issue — the Polisario, Morocco and Algeria — to reach a settlement.

The US

Salah El-Mokhtar, editor-in-chief of the Arabic Al-Jumhuriya newspaper

We can say that 1995 was the year of the awakening with people defending their (national) independence and playing a distinguished role in confronting the idea of a unipolar world. This recognition of the importance of independence has belittled American hegemony in the international order.

It will restore equilibrium in the international arena after years of imbalance. For example, eastern Europe, with the exception of East Germany, has returned to the socialist bloc after the failure of the capitalist concept in these states. In Russia as well there is the victory of the nationalist and communist camp over the liberal, capitalist one.

Terrorism

Farouq Abu-Eissa, head of the Arab Lawyers Union

Despite the clampdown on terrorism, this phenomenon will continue in 1996 as the main hotbed of terrorism remains, namely the National Islamic Front in Sudan. This will continue until the Sudanese people overthrow the government.

Yemen-Eritrea

Suleiman Awad, minister-plenipotentiary in the Egyptian mission to the UN

The Yemeni-Eritrean struggle is another development that is expected to be tackled in 1996 either through bilateral and regional channels, namely the Arab League, or through the UN as Yemen has announced.

Reported by **Rasha Saad and Sherine Bahaa**

Standing up for the disinherited

Samiha Khalil is running against Yasser Arafat for the presidency of the Palestinian Interim Authority. **Graham Usher** interviewed her in Ramallah



Last month, Samiha Khalil announced her intention to run for the presidency of the Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority in the upcoming elections due to be held on 20 January.

Umm Khalil is the director of one of the largest charitable organisations in the Occupied Territories, the Society of In'ash Al-Usha based in Al-Bireh, the West Bank. Since 1967, she has been a member of the Palestine National Council. She is also the current president of the PLO's General Union of Palestinian Women.

In the interview below, she gives her reasons for being the sole challenger to Yasser Arafat in the presidential elections, as well as citing what for her are the crucial tasks facing Palestinian society in the coming period.

Why did you decide to run for presidency?
First of all, it is my right as a Palestinian woman, as someone who has given 40 years of her life to the Palestinian struggle, to stand for the presidency of the Palestinian Council. Second, I believe the current "peace process" does not provide a just solution to the Palestinian question.

The Israelis are still expropriating our lands, by thousands of dunams, forcing us to live in isolated cantons. The so-called by-pass roads are separating one Palestinian area from another. Students in Gaza cannot travel freely to their universities in Bizzet, Hebron, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The prisoners are still in jail, despite promises from the Israelis that

they are going to be released. For these reasons, I am standing for election.

If elected, what are your policy priorities? And how do they differ from those of Yasser Arafat?

I am unaware of Chairman Arafat's programme. My programme may be summarised very simply. I believe that the Oslo based peace process will not lead to Palestinian sovereignty. It will not lead to our freedom. For sure, it's good to see the Israeli army leave our cities in Gaza and the West Bank, for us to be able freely to raise our flag. But all this is by order of the Israelis. It is out of our hands. It is Israel that decides which Palestinians can return to their homeland and which cannot.

My son, for example, is not allowed to return to the Israeli authorities. They told me to go to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). So I applied to the PNA. After 23 days, the PNA told me it could do nothing about my son without permission from Israel. This summarises the Oslo process perfectly. The Palestinians still have no control over their lives. We are treated as nothing.

Let me be clear. I am not against peace with Israel. I supported the Palestinian National Council's 1988 decision in Algiers to legally recognise Israel behind its 1967 borders in exchange for peace, security and an independent Palestinian state. The majority of Palestinians support this solution. But, since then, Israel has refused this solution. With the Oslo and

Taba agreements, they are still refusing. So are you in favour of annulling the Oslo accords, of stopping the peace negotiations with Israel?

No. I am a peaceful woman. I don't want to solve the problem by force. I want to solve it by peaceful means. Nor am I against negotiations with Israel. But I want the peace to be a real peace. I want the negotiations to address the basic issues: the question of Jerusalem, settlements, refugees and the borders of a future Palestinian state.

I want also to correct the flaws in the original Oslo agreement, so that Palestinians can now enjoy genuine sovereignty over their own education, their own economic system, over agriculture, over their own lives. We seek full independence. Without this, believe me, war will return to this land.

Who do you see as your main constituencies, your main bases of support?

I will get support from all those Palestinians whose situation has worsened with the peace process. The families of the prisoners, the families of the martyrs. I seek to represent the disinherited of our society.

Since 1967, I have been the head of 55 charitable societies in the West Bank and Gaza. These societies serve around 32,000 Palestinians. They have provided 5,000 jobs for women. We have 240 kindergartens and nursery places for children so that women can work outside their homes. In each case, we are encouraging Palestinian independence. We don't

want our people to be beggars. These, I feel, are my constituencies.

Do you view yourself as a candidate who advocates the interests of Palestinian women? Not exclusively women's interests, no. I seek to advocate the interests of all Palestinians: men, women and children. But, of course, I want Palestinian women to achieve equality with their men.

How do you see these Palestinian parties which have decided to boycott the elections?

For me, the crucial task in the current period is to achieve national unity. If the Palestinians are not together, we will not go one step forward. I believe that all Palestinians should participate in these elections.

I have also had discussions with representatives from the opposition parties. Many of their members have said they will vote for me in the elections out of a sense of national duty.

A recent study showed that the electoral campaigns of Yasser Arafat and his Fatah movement had received much more Palestinian media coverage than other candidates and parties. Do you sense any discrimination against you?

No. When Arafat came to Ramallah, he invited me to sit beside him during the PNA cabinet meeting. We are old friends. I cannot say that the PNA has prevented me from saying or doing anything in my campaign.

Changing the odds

The bargaining chips have changed and the players are adjusting their game. **Mohamed El-Sayed Said** weighs up prospects on the Syrian-Israeli track

Encouraged by President Clinton's need for a diplomatic victory in the course of his re-election campaign, and emboldened by the passing of Rabin, the Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad made the first move towards the resumption of peace talks with Israel. The cost of this move was only the adoption of milder language and a few newspaper articles showing a willingness to speak better of Israel.

In return, the new Israeli prime minister went so far as to indicate that Israel may not insist on the stationing of early warning systems on the Golan Heights. In a matter of a few days, Syrian-Israeli talks were resumed in Maryland, close to Washington DC.

What changed to allow the resuscitation of the long stalled negotiations? Not really much in the substance of the negotiations. The real change took place in the arena of symbolic politics between Israel and Syria.

Since the start of the process, bullying was the true name of the game between the two parties. Both were more involved in posturing than in real negotiations over the substance of issues on the agenda. For outside observers this denoted a tough interaction between two pig-headed and immobile negotiations styles. In fact this appearance is, to the two parties at least, quite rational.

Between Syria and Israel there exist no true hurdles on the road to peace-making. Syria is not so scared of normalisation with Israel. The latter does certainly appreciate the strategic value of the Golan Heights, but is far from being short of ideas on acceptable security guarantees that would satisfy its needs. Settlers and settlements on the heights are no serious problem since the region itself is in no way a rival to the West Bank in ideological worth to Israel. The true motive for mutual bullying was their symbolism of negotiations not their substance.

The semiology of Israeli-Syrian negotiations is driven by the desire to break the will of the other, or at least to prevent the other from grasping one's move as a sign of weakness. For Syria, the essential purpose is to keep its image, in the Arab World, as the true (and only) champion of Arab resistance to Israel and Zionism. Implicit behind this image is its intention to maintain its status as a rival and a balance to Israel in the greater Syrian region and in the Arab East in general. By all means, Syria wants and

needs peace. But the nature of peace is not to be understood by Israel as a green light to discount Syria's role in the area.

For Israel, the purpose behind the symbolism of toughness is exactly the opposite. It is meant to deprive Syria of its veto power, and to force it to swallow the role of a smaller partner in the politics of the region if, and only if, it accommodates the role of Israel as the dominant power in the Fertile Crescent. In this light, breaking the other's will is the true essence of the game between the two.

But if this is to be seen as the reason behind the stalling of negotiations, what has changed to allow their resumption? Have either, or both, parties dropped their interest in this game? And what are the prospects for the peace talks in the light of the new factors that led to their revival?

The passing of the former prime minister of Israel may be counted as a factor. A man who was never known to be gifted in the art of politics had no reason for budging. Another factor is the approaching American presidential election campaign and the need for the diplomatic breakthrough which promotes the image of Bill Clinton as a clever statesman interested in and capable of running a competent foreign policy.

But these two factors are only creating new contours for the game of negotiations between Syria and Israel. They are not the cause behind the change of tactics. The most important reason seems to be a change in the configuration of negotiating chips and the real odds. It was this change that may have convinced a man such as Hafez Al-Assad, who built his fame on stubbornness, to change his negotiating style.

For Syria, the configuration of negotiating chips has changed for two reasons. First is the fact that normalisation between Arabs and Israel is proceeding without the consent of Syria, or more accurately, in spite of its objections.

Secondly, Syria seems to be now besieged by hostile regimes from all sides with the single exception of Lebanon. Hopes for a breakthrough on the Iraq issue are evaporating. Iraq's support is dwindling. The self-rule formula has not blown up and a belligerent Arafat is entrenching his power. Jordan is more firmly anchoring all its stakes on Israel and the United States. A sympathetic Egypt is willing to accommodate Syrian tactics only half-

way. Even Lebanon cannot wait for ever.

All this demanded a change of perspective on the part of Syria. The change is far from complete since Syria could still rely on other factors of power. The signals of compromise sent out by Syria were perfectly synchronised with two major events. The most significant is the release of thousands of Muslim Brothers and other radical opposition elements in Syrian jails. The motives behind this move are certainly far from projecting a new image of a merciful leader. It was simply designed to signal to Israel and to the United States that if Assad is so severely pressured and his interests undermined there exists in Syria a much more radical force that cannot wait for launching Jihad. It is only his regime that could possibly cage this ultra radical force.

On the other hand, Syria was keen to call a meeting of the Damascus Declaration member states; thus symbolising that it is still far from being cornered and isolated.

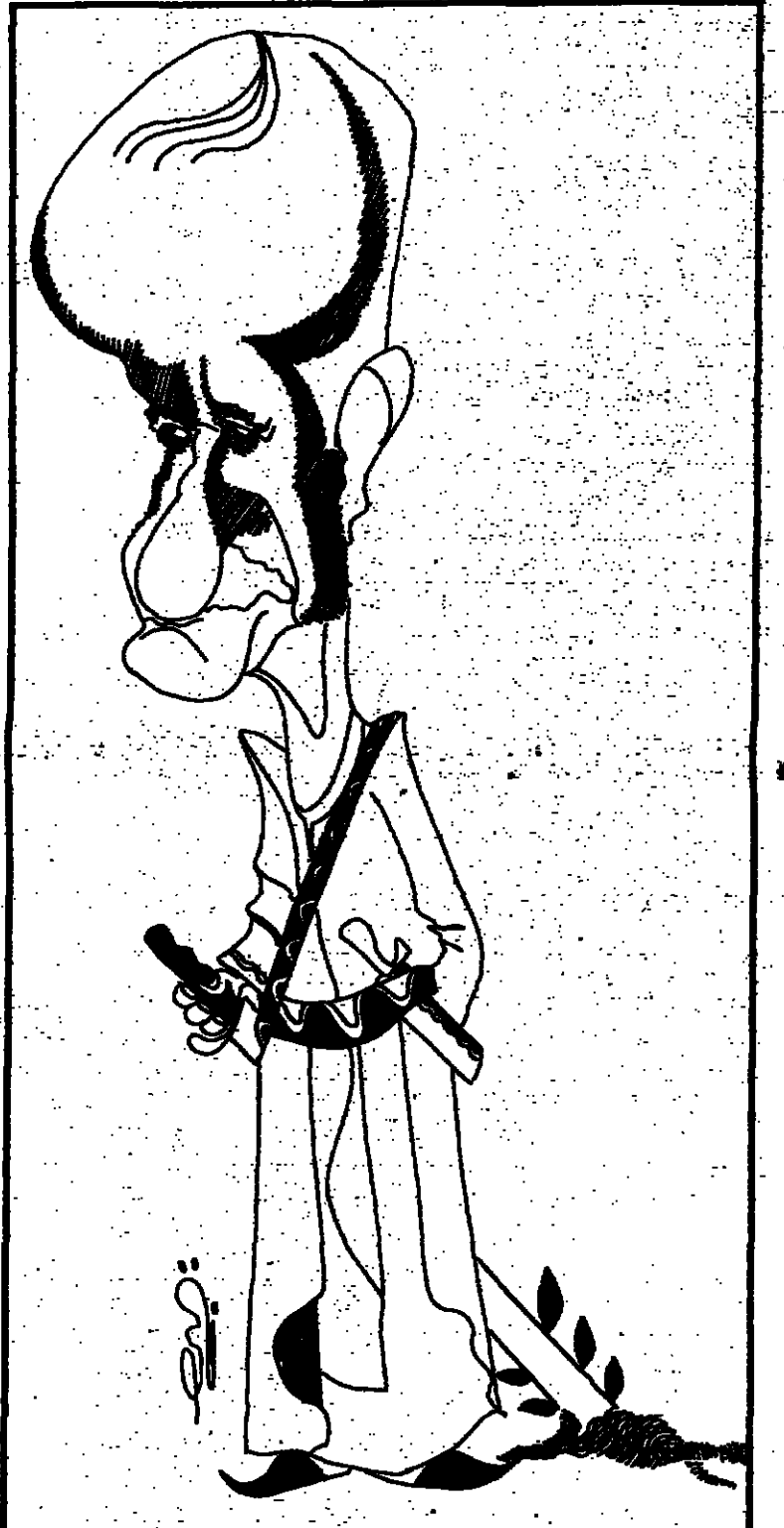
For Israel, the bargaining chips have changed as well. It is not just the death of Rabin that caused this change. It is rather the weaker position of Peres vis-à-vis his rivals from the Likud party who will soon be challenging him in the elections for the job of prime minister. Peres could pursue one of two tactics in so far as the Arab-Israeli peace is concerned.

Traditionally, it was safe for the Labour, under Rabin, to show an extremely tough negotiating style towards Syria. Labour could show itself to be winning both peace and unfavourable security. In addition, it could take pride in breaking the will of the toughest Syrian president. If peace was not achieved on the Syrian track, it would have been enough that peace was accomplished with the Jordanians and Palestinians without prejudicing security on the Syrian front. But if Peres pursued this line he would have a very slim chance of enhancing his popularity.

For his staunch enemies among the Israeli public, toughness with Syria will hardly improve his image. Failure to bring peace with Syria will lose him the enthusiasm of both peace sympathisers and neutrals. It would be much more impressive to public opinion to show that he, the true architect of the peace process, has actually brought peace on all fronts, including the painful Lebanese and the re-

spectively powerful and hostile Syrian fronts. The logic is clear and even seductive.

If peace has certain pitfalls for some Israelis, Peres would pay the cost anyway. It is thus much smarter to aim for the entire reward for the whole peace process, and to bid for the job of the prime minister as the man who brought peace to Israel. Reaping the



Lonely at the top

The Islamist Welfare Party topped the polls, but it cannot win any friends in parliament, writes **Arshad Uz-Zaman**

A little over 34 million voters went to the polls in Turkey's recent general elections, including the eastern region which lay buried in deep snow. In a country where absence from the booth is punishable, the voter turnout was nearly 90 per cent.

The voters, who have a traditional right-wing tilt, moved further right at the expense of the fractious left. For the first time in the history of the 70-year-old secular republic established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the Islamic Welfare Party (IWP) came out on top with 21.1 per cent of the votes.

The party, led by Necmettin Erbakan, got 158 seats in a parliament which increased its size from 450 to 550 members. Two other right-wing parties, the ruling True Path Party (DYP) led by Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, and the main opposition party, the Motherland Party (ANAP) led by Mesut Yilmaz, received 19.5 per cent and 19.8 per cent of the votes and 135 seats and 132 seats respectively.

Another right-wing party with racial overtones, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) led by 80-year-old Alparslan Turkes, was wiped out due to an electoral system which requires parties to obtain a minimum 10 per cent of votes countrywide before taking a seat in parliament.

The quarrelsome Turkish left also saw its fortune sag badly. The Democratic Left Party (DSP) led by Bulent Ecevit, received 14.6 per cent of the votes and 75 seats. The Republican People's Party (HP) led by Demiz Baykal, which was a coalition partner in the outgoing Ciller

government, narrowly crossed the threshold with 10.5 per cent of the votes and 50 seats.

There has been jubilation in the camp of Erbakan, whose RP two years ago scored a stunning victory in the municipal polls. The general elections demonstrated that this was no freak result. At the same time just because there are RP mayors in the two largest cities of Turkey, one must not jump to the conclusion that an Islamic government is on the horizon in Turkey. The voters have been truly even-handed, except in the case of the Left, and the verdict is in favour of a coalition government. But will the RP find a coalition partner?

In the triangular contest of the Right the voters have shown no partiality towards either the outgoing lady prime minister or the male opposition leader. They led two right-wing parties which are really two sides of the same coin. The voters have sent a message that these two parties must unite which would bring them close to a majority in the parliament. In that event finding a small third partner would not pose any problem.

In any case unlike the outgoing two party coalition of centre-right and centre-left, the next government must be a three-party coalition. The only other alternative would be a minority government of two right-wing parties that would be supported by other parties from outside. The pressure for the two right-wing parties to unite is bound to mount inexorably. A suggestion currently making the rounds in Ankara is that the DYP and ANAP should form a coalition on the

model of Israel, where the coalition partners decided to share power on the basis of each serving a two year term.

If the RP's score is impressive, no less remarkable is the result of the pro-Kurdish HA-DEP in south-eastern Turkey. More than 250,000 security forces have been fighting a murderous war in the inhospitable mountains of the south-east against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). This 11-year war has claimed nearly 11,000 lives and the entire region wears a desolate look. HA-DEP came out first in Kurdish inhabited provinces such as Hakkari, Diyarbakir, Batman, Sinak and Siirt, but the party failed to send any representatives to parliament in Ankara due to the 10 per cent threshold.

The election results are a clear setback for Prime Minister Tansu Ciller and the DYP. Ciller is an economics professor who entered politics only five years ago. Yet her management of the economy has left much to be desired. Ciller took over the government with a vow to control inflation, but has seen it soar to nearly 100 per cent. The value of the Turkish Lira has also fallen dramatically.

At the last leg of the campaign she scored a real success by engineering the entry of Turkey into the Western European Customs Union, an essential stepping stone for Turkey in her quest to join the powerful European Union (EU). Yet even this success has not helped Ciller on her home election front. During her five years of political life Turkey's first lady prime minister has proved herself an adroit politician. But the poor

performance on the economic front may prove to be the real Achilles' heel. The Turkish voters have clearly signalled that they are unhappy with the economic burden they have to carry. Yilmaz and his ANAP will find small comfort that they have barely equalled the score of the ruling DYP.

The election verdict is in favour of a centre-right coalition and this applies for the Islamic RP of Erbakan, an engineer turned politician. During the height of the election campaign, Erbakan was careful not to attack directly Ataturk's reforms, which transformed the Turkish society. Even on a sensitive subject like Islamic banking or Turkey's entry into the EU, he has been careful not to take any hard position.

In his attacks against all the regimes that have ruled Turkey for the last seven decades, Erbakan has attacked them as "blind imitators of the West". However, it is noteworthy that the RP mayors who had promised to close bars and similar places of entertainment have yet to tackle these "un-Islamic activities".

It would be unwise, therefore, to jump to the conclusion that in Turkey the swing is towards extremism which goes by the name of political Islam. The election results clearly demonstrate the voters' preference for a centre-right regime, but there is no mandate for any kind of adventurism.

The writer is a former Bangladeshi ambassador and assistant secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Handwritten text in Arabic script: "سماحاً لـ" (Samaḥa li-)

Al-Ahram: A Diwan of contemporary life

On Thursday 18 February 1898, the honourable Hassan Bey Madkur stood before the General Assembly, one of the two *Shura* (consultative) councils in Egypt at the time, and offered to write a letter to the government on behalf of his "venerable colleagues". The letter would "beseech the government to act, from hereon, on behalf of justice and the public welfare by selling its movable and non-movable assets only via public auction, announced beforehand in the official gazette."

In the ensuing discussion on the floor of the council, a handful of collaborators with the authorities objected to Madkur's proposal on the grounds that it would "injure the government". In response, *Al-Ahram* commented, "How can the government permit itself to injure an entire nation, gentle and easily prone to emotion, and not permit that nation to cry out in sorrow to those who acted unjustly and tell them that they committed villainy."

Madkur's manner would certainly have been considered impertinent and contentious in those times. Yet, according to *Al-Ahram*, his motives were compelling. Firstly, one of the functions of the legislative council was "to restrain the government morally and tangibly from acting in a manner that does not accord with the welfare of the nation." Thus, "the assembly has indicated its condemnation on behalf of its constituents and finds that the government should review this instance carefully, if it considers embarking on this course again in the future." Secondly, passion was provoked by the nature of the occurrence that prompted the assembly's debate. It involved a plot of governmental land known as the Basandila lot, which, as *Al-Ahram* goes on to say, "was granted to a company dear to the government as some of its owners are themselves among our nation's guardians. The reason for this, it is alleged, is that, during the ministers' session in which the sale of this lot was discussed, the devil caused a representative to forget to mention that an Egyptian-owned company had made a higher offer. As a result, the fraudulent sale was concluded at the expense of this ever fruitful land which is Egypt."

This story, which had begun four years earlier, in 1894, provides a vivid example of how Egypt was systematically being sold off on a grand scale. It is a story that merits our attention as it is told through the pages of *Al-Ahram*.

The term "the plunder of Egypt" has been frequently used by European authors to describe British policies from Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In general, these authors refer to the acquisition by foreign companies of agricultural land and their control of the financial machinery of the country. However, they neglect to mention two points. Firstly, the process of "plundering" was never as easy as they portray. In their focus on economic factors, they tended to ignore the human factor, in which there was much give and

take. Secondly, the process went far beyond agriculture and finance. In fact, the Europeans exercised authority over the country's finances long before the British occupation. An equally, if not more, enticing quarry for the Europeans were the new public services and utilities that came into being with the modernising state: the railways, electricity, and shipping companies to name a few.

Prior to the British occupation, the Khedive Ismail personally owned, in the name of the crown, 434,975 feddans of land. This he put up as collateral against a loan of nine million pounds and the land was put under special administration under the law of liquidation of 1880, which regulated loan repayments through the income generated from the land. At the same time, the royal family owned more than 400,000 feddans of land, which was also put up as collateral by the khedive for a loan from the House of Rothschild of 8.5 million pounds. This land was put under the special board to supervise the payments on the loan. The Egyptian government also authorised the sale of portions of this land, the proceeds of which could also be used to settle portions of the loan.

This system continued until 1898, when the need for money to finance the recovery of Sudan mitigated the selling of both government and royal family lands. From 1882 to 1898, the occupation authorities would periodically test the Egyptian reaction toward selling the land to British concerns. The most important such test took place between 1892-1894 over the sale of Basandila. The ensuing battle that raged over the issue was closely covered by *Al-Ahram*.

The British High Commissioner's yearly report on Egypt sounded the opening shots. He severely criticised the supervisory council over the royal lands for failing to lease the land to farmers or failing to lure buyers in order to generate the monies to fulfil the commitments to the House of Rothschild. The official on the council described the charges as exaggerated on both counts. And while Egyptians could benefit from some reduction in the prices, they were not, in the minds of the authorities, the intended beneficiaries. Blatantly betraying their true intentions, the council issued a resolution decreasing "the reduction by 40 per cent in the current price value of the land." The measure prompted *Al-Ahram* to comment, "The Rothschilds should have no problem accepting the reduction. They will lose nothing." Nor did they complain. The measure provided them their yearly payment of 300,000 pounds.

Nevertheless, paying off the loan was not the source of contention. It was to whom the price-reduced lands would be sold. Nor would the issue have aroused such furore were it not for an unanticipated development: that a group of Egyptian landowners would join together to form a company and enter the tender.

We learn from *Al-Ahram*, therefore, that

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The term "the plunder of Egypt" has been frequently used by European authors to describe British policies from Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In this instalment of his chronicle of modern Egyptian history as seen through the pages of *Al-Ahram*, Dr Yunan Labib Rizq looks at the sale of Egyptian land and companies to foreign buyers with the connivance of the occupying power

there were two major rival companies. One was the Beheira Irrigation Company owned by foreign financiers. The other was a company "formed by prominent Egyptians" for whom Abdou Bey El-Babli was the spokesman. Evidently, the Egyptian company had no official name at first, for the newspaper referred to it as "the Babli Company". Yet, we do know that Hassan Madkur, the General Assembly member quoted at the beginning of this article was also a part-owner of the company.

We further learn that the British financial advisor subjected Babli to considerable pressure to which he eventually succumbed. On 10 May 1894, we read, "Reports have reached the newspaper from Cairo to the effect that the mediation used by the financial advisor, Palmer, to convince Babli to withdraw his tender for Basandila and to submit for Bilgas instead had succeeded. Babli has in fact pledged this in writing."

It is also interesting to discover that the Khedive Abbas II supported the Egyptian-owned company, through the agency of the prime minister at the time, Nubur Pasha. "Patriots voice their praise for the honourable Nubur Pasha who supported them in the contest over the Basandila lot, a fact that has been cited in all the newspapers as testimony of his keenness to promote the interests of our country over other interests," *Al-Ahram* commented.

Nevertheless, Babli's acceptance of the offer of compensation with the Bilgas lot was a source of great disappointment. An *Al-Ahram* editorial subjected him to severe



Lord Cromer

criticism: "If he had not conceded, the Egyptian company would certainly have won its just claim," it said. Furthermore, all attempts to evade responsibility were futile. "He is guilty as charged," the newspaper proclaimed. Babli had deceived the entire Egyptian people, not just the members of the company that had appointed him their representative.

At the same time, various reports indicate that the Beheira company that won the tender for Basandila, took that as a signal to grab more Egyptian land. On 17 June we read, "The Basandila company intends to buy the Ras Al-Khalij lot from Boghos Pasha Nubur and the Bilgas lot and other lots from the royal land council." A month later a second news item reports that the same company obtained the agreement of the Administration of Government Funds "to buy 100,000 feddans of land in Al-Borailas for 12 piastres a feddan." A few weeks later we read of the company's plans to buy land in the adjacent areas of Balim and Kom Al-Akhdar, elevating its accumulated holdings to 400,000 feddans.

Land was not the only item on sale in the European buying spree in Egypt. Although the spree lasted throughout the nineties, 1898 marked a zenith. *Al-Ahram* described it as "a year of hardship, misery and misfortune in which the armies of calamity mustered their forces on the ground and disaster loomed in the air."

The year began with the sale of the Royal Khedival Shipping Company. If land had been a symbol of national wealth on

sale, the shipping company soon became a symbol of the nation's sovereignty up for tender. One of the Khedive Ismail's most noted achievements, the national shipping line carried the Egyptian flag around the world. The idea of selling the company was first mooted in 1883, a year after the British occupation. It was a handy way for Egypt to pay back its debts, according to Lord Devron. It was 15 years later that the idea became a reality, the most important impediment being national opposition.

In January 1898, as the sale of the company appeared almost certain, *Al-Ahram* expressed the widely felt sense of outrage. On 24 January it reported, "We have learned from reliable sources that the Ministry of Finance has set the price of 150,000 pounds for the sale of the royal steamers, on the condition that the purchaser construct a new basin for the cleaning and maintenance of the ships the cost of which will be 80,000 pounds." The newspaper's comment was succinct: "This sale would be perfidy!" This was only the opening remark in a campaign that grew increasingly vociferous the more the British financial advisor advanced in the project.

On the following day, *Al-Ahram* gave full coverage to the issue, publishing the opinions of all the newspapers that appeared in Egypt at the time, regardless of their language. All were unanimous "in their censure of the measure and their condemnation of the government which intends to deprive the nation of its shipping line and dockyards for the benefit of a British company and to the advantage of the British government."

Unfortunately, the matter was beyond the good offices of the cabinet of Mustafa Fahmi. In fact, it was out of the government's hands entirely, since it was the British authorities who ultimately took the final decision. On 27 January, *Al-Ahram* announced the sale of the khedival steamers to a Mr Alderson for 150,000 pounds. "One could hardly imagine a more paltry sum," commented *Al-Ahram* in dismay.

At the same time the sale of the national shipping line took place, the Ministry of Finance announced that it was putting up the inspectors (estates) of Wadi Tomailat for tender. Proceeds from this inspection had originally been established as a waqf or religious trust to help finance the activities of the Ministry of Education. This was a signal to *Al-Ahram* that the occupation authorities were extending their reach into the waqf lands, "without regard for religious law which must be respected." Moreover, its suspicions that the conditions governing the sale of Wadi Tomailat would be as scandalous as those that governed the sale of the khedival shipping company would prove correct and that it would be "a perfidious treachery that will be disastrous for the Ministry of Education."

Hardly was the Wadi sold off than the buying frenzy turned to the khedival

crown lands, the proceeds from which were allocated to paying off the country's debts. On 3 May that year the newspaper announced that the Council of Ministers had met to formulate a plan for the sale of the "property, estate, factories and other such edifices" on the land to a jointly owned French, British and Egyptian company. "Monsieur Souris has travelled to Europe to meet with the financiers over the purchase of 304,000 feddans of choice agricultural land, all in Upper Egypt, as well as nine factories and 160 ferries," the newspaper continued.

Soon minds turned to the public utilities. Heading the list were the railways which had been a government-owned project since their inception. Yet, on 25 February 1898 we turn to the headline "The government sells the Egyptian railways to an English company!" In spite of rumours concerning the intent to sell, the author of the article expressed his doubts regarding their veracity. "The government has desisted from concluding such damaging contracts for fear of confirming the rumours that it is selling off the country to foreign financiers piece by piece."

That, of course, was not the real reason the contract fell through. The British, even before their occupation of the country, retained control over the vital utilities through the placement of British or pro-British officials in senior positions in their respective administrations. Also, the railways were not profitable. In fact, for the national treasury they were a burden which no foreign company wished to assume. Yet while news of the sale of the northern Egyptian lines faded from the pages of the press, reports surfaced about the possibility of the sale of the Qena-Aswan line and the Sudan line. The venture was certainly associated with the name of Cecil Rhodes, who conceived the Cape to Cairo railway line. *Al-Ahram* confirmed suspicions of this connection when it reported, "It has been proven that the pressures the occupiers are putting on the Egyptian government to sell the Sudanese railways is only intended to serve their well-known goal of reaching Uganda, a project begun by Mr Cecil Rhodes, a close friend of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who visited Egypt two years ago for that very purpose." Given the circumstances of that tragic year for Egypt, *Al-Ahram* could hardly express surprise at the proposed sale. "One has come to expect the most outlandish deeds now that Egypt has become such an enticing prey," it remarked. Its prediction, as often has been the case, proved accurate, for the country would indeed suffer the consequences of more outlandish deals now that the process of selling off Egypt was in full swing.

The author is a renowned historian and a professor of modern history at Ain Shams University.

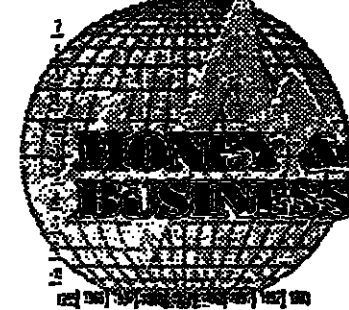


Conference on natural disasters

THE FIRST International conference in Egypt dealing with preventing the effects of natural disasters will be held from 6-10 January 1996. This conference will be organised by Cairo University, in cooperation with the International Committee for Earthquake Prediction, and sponsored by the National Insurance Co.

National Insurance will organise an all-day workshop on insurance. The conference deal with a number of topics, including engineering, construction, insurance, the role of the media, and insurance, engineering, earthquakes, construction, media and ways to manage the events of a disaster with minimal losses to buildings and persons.

MONEY & BUSINESS



Luxembourg records highest income average

WORLD Bank statistics regarding national income showed Luxembourg to be at the forefront as the annual average income reached US\$39,850. Switzerland came as the second highest country in which the average income reached US\$37,180, followed by Japan, achieving US\$34,030. The United States came sixth, with US\$25,860.

At the bottom of the list lies Mozambique, with US\$80, after Ethiopia US\$130, and Malawi, with US\$140.

The World Bank report also indicated that Thailand made the fastest economic growth over the last 10 years, with average income increasing by 8.2 per cent from 1985-1994, surpassing South Korea's 7.8 growth rate.

Exports: a major factor for economic growth

STARTING from the 1960s, many nations of the world have come to realise the important role exports play in the growth of societies and peoples. Nowhere has this been felt more than in South East Asia.

Korea, whose exports did not go beyond US\$30mn in the 60s has now increased to US\$70bn. Similar growth surges have been felt in Singapore and Thailand. At the same time, Egyptian exports

have not gone beyond US\$500mn.

Mamdouh Thabit Makki, deputy chairman of the Federation of Industries and member of the People's Assembly, said that exporting is the prime mover of economic activity. Every increase in the average growth of exports translates into a double increase of the national product. It is a known fact that there is a chronic deficit in the Egyptian

trade balance which began in the 60s whose figures reached US\$7.6bn at the end of 1995. This deficit can be attributed to a doubling in the growth of commodity exports while at the same time, imports have made a marked increase due to development programmes and population growth.

The surplus in the balance of services was the basis for overcoming the budget deficit. With the beginning the

economic reform programme which began in 1991, whose axis pivots mainly on foreign trade, measures were taken to redress the balance of payment and boost exports.

The Ministry of Economy, in cooperation with an American organisation, has prepared a comprehensive study on exports in Egypt and trade relations within the context of new global variables.

The study clarified Egypt's position regionally and internationally, with its major role within the changing political climate of the new Middle East, which requires Egypt to have a strong economy which will give it the capacity to function as a major competitor. This will never happen unless Egypt increases its export activity, for it is only by exporting that Egypt can realise strong economic growth.

Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt S.A.E

Out of its full understanding of how important health care is, Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt finances the erection of production lines, facilities for the make up of new factories as well as all required equipment and materials for the companies operating in the medical field. Faisal Bank also provides them with the required capital. The volume of financing reached L.E. 1.6 billion. Faisal Bank holds shares worth L.E. 22 million in numerous companies.

Company	Location
Medicine Production:-	
1- Farco	Amriya - Alexandria.
2- Parcoy International	Borg El Arab - Industrial Zone.
3- Tenth Ramadan for Medical Products	6th of October - Industrial Zone
Health Care	
1- Missr International Hospital Co.	Dokki - Giza.
2- Cairo Specialized Hospital Co.	Roxi - Cairo.
3- Mansoura Medical Centre	Mansoura City.

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Win some, lose some...

MERCEDES-Benz released its annual sales figures, reporting that sales went up nearly two per cent over the previous year.

Sales of automobiles for 1995 reached 72 billion marks, compared to 70.7 billion marks in 1994. In 1994, 592,000 passenger cars were sold, while strangely enough, this figure dropped to 580,000 in 1995. It was, however, the increase in the truck sales figure, which increased 10 per cent, that made up for the difference. The company is banking on the sales of 600,000 automobiles for 1996, with an increase of 330,000 automobiles.

On the other hand, the company's earnings were affected by the high exchange rate of the German mark, and thus decreased by 1 billion marks.

The volume of sales of passenger cars brought in nearly 40 billion marks while trucks, busses and other commercial vehicles brought in 32 billion marks.

As a result, the company has not realised an overall profit.

Turkey's political instability triggers battered markets

ALWAYS concerned about the possibility of an Islamic party assuming power a few days ago, many businessmen lobbied against the Islamic Welfare Party, imparting the message that the party should not form the new government. Such political unrest triggered a

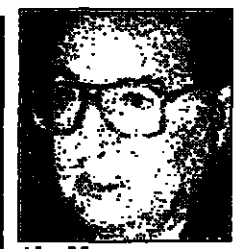
falling-in-value lira that dropped to 62,500 against the US dollar, with the inflation rate reaching 90 per cent. This disturbed transactions and made industrialists in particular wonder if there is real hope for recovery.

Willing to voice their re-

jection of the Islamic Welfare Party, the Turkish Industrialists Association took out advertisements in newspapers demanding cooperation between the True Path Party, Tansu Ciller's party and the Motherland Party.

Turkey recently managed to join the EU Customs Union,

in the hopes that it will provide access for its leather industry. In this regard, businessmen, most anxiously await any indications of improvement, as they are in need of an economic reform programme. The Islamic Welfare Party has yet to display a programme in this regard.



Abu Moussa

Egyptian industry exhibition

EVER-keen to back up national industries, Faisal Islamic Bank is sponsoring the Egyptian Industry Exhibition organised by Nile Jet Travel. The conference will be held from 30 January to 18 February 1996 at the Cairo International Conference Centre in Nasr City. The exhibition will display the products of various sectors of industry, including housing and tourism, board chairman Abdel-Hamid Abu Moussa stated.

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One Performance Only

The UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali's visit to Egypt, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East brought into sharp focus the limited scope of the UN mandate. Boutros Ghali has been an outspoken advocate of UN reform: "But that would cost money and nobody is ready to pay." Will Asia's new powers now foot the bill? Gamal-Nkrumah looks through Asian eyes at how emerging Asian powers are pressing for a new vision for the United Nations. In exclusive interviews with past and present UN representatives of Japan, India and Pakistan Al-Ahram Weekly catches glimpses of the new UN Asia says it deserves



Arbiters of UN reform

Fifty years ago, when the United Nations was founded, the world was a more equitable place. It might come as a surprise to some, but according to recently released World Bank statistical reports, the world's richest fifth have incomes 60 times greater than the poorest fifth, twice the disparity of 30 years ago. The poorest 50 countries are home to one-fifth of the world's people and account for less than 2 per cent of global income. None of the poorest countries have permanent seats at the UN Security Council. Few have a say in deliberations. Their voting patterns at the UN are closely monitored by Western powers, and they are urged by carrot and stick tactics to toe the line.

Resistance to UN reform is actually minimal. Everyone — rich and poor — wants change. The problem is disagreement over the nature of reform. Is the stranglehold of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council over global governance and international relations that hard to break? One of the five permanent members itself is the biggest Asian power — China. But, the bid by the other Asian powers to see UN reforms commensurate with their international political standing and with their economic prowess is gaining momentum.

The West has spearheaded the fight for sweeping UN reforms ranging from the streamlining of the international organisation's bureaucracy and the elimination of some of its specialised agencies to resolving its financial crisis. But, the West appears to be less keen on

the democratisation of the world body.

From their side, the Asians appear to be asking the world to recognise and respect their contemporary capabilities. The developing nations of the South in Africa, Asia and the Americas are at odds with the industrially advanced nations of the North over how best the UN can help construct suitable democratic administrative, institutional and political structures in the Third World. North and South are at loggerheads over plans to reform the UN. At the heart of the quarrel between North and South is the international debate regarding the relationship between democracy, development and human rights.

Two aspects of the debate have made a deep impression. One, is that the South remains under-represented and feels politically sidelined. The second, is that the South — both the newly industrialised Asian nations and the least developed African ones — remains unconvinced that the globalisation of the world economy, domestic economic liberalisation and deregulation will necessarily lead to development and democracy.

Third World nations have similar, if not identical, views on how the UN is to be strengthened and restructured. The international climate is propitious for a new phase of global governance. We live in a changing world. There are, however, similarities and points of difference as far as the nations of the South are concerned. Africa, with just over 10 per cent of the world's population, accounts for a mere

0.4 per cent of world manufacturing exports and less than one per cent of international trade. Asia, far from better, and now accounts for 40 per cent of world trade. Such facts and figures are bound to make an impact on anticipated UN reforms.

Economic growth in Asia is impressive by international standards. In 1994, China — the only Asian permanent member of the UN Security Council — registered an annual economic growth rate of 10 per cent. Malaysia, Korea, Vietnam and Thailand have growth rates of 9 per cent, while Singapore with 8 per cent, Indonesia and Taiwan with 7 per cent, and India with 6 per cent annual economic growth rates are far ahead of the European members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 2.4 per cent per annum.

In sharp contrast, the situation in Africa is far from reassuring. Despite over 160 World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan accords supported by some \$200 billion in net development assistance in the past decade, Africa's economic crisis continues to worsen. Now, UN reforms must take such disparities of fortunes into account. The emerging realities in the Third World will override any talk of a radical democratisation of UN structures.

But, Africa is not alone. South Asia has failed to catch up economically with East Asia. "Can the right to development be denied at the international level on the grounds that there is no consensus on

what obligations it imposes on the developed countries? The answer is a clear no," said Ahmad Kamal, Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN and president of the UN's Economic and Social Council.

"Even in the area of civil and political rights, there is often no consensus on the exact content of the rights. Yet we do not jettison these rights because we cannot arrive at a complete agreement on what they entail. In fact, in the case of the Right to Development, there is considerable agreement on what the developed countries should do to promote economic growth and development," Ambassador Kamal said.

Another prominent Pakistani closely associated with the UN, Mahbub ul-Haq, just completed his term as Special Advisor to the Administrator of the UN Development Programme. He was the creator and prime author of UNDP's annual Human Development Reports. "Economic and financial power is much more diffused now than in 1945, when the United States produced over one-half of the global output compared to less than one-fifth today," ul-Haq said.

"The UN has spent more on peacekeeping operations in the last two years than in the preceding 48," ul-Haq pointed out. The developing countries of the South account for 15 per cent of world military spending — \$118 billion annually. "What these new situations require is socioeconomic development upstream, not UN sol-

diers in blue berets downstream," ul-Haq noted. "If there are global needs, there must be some global means of funding. The world community cannot rely on the fiftieth anniversary of individual nations for its collective security," ul-Haq stressed. He suggested that the composition of the new Economic Security Council, commensurate with the new economic world order, should "reflect the changing balance of political and economic power. It should include those countries which are most populous and have the largest real economies as members."

UN reform with an Asian tinge is imminent. Most of Asia's emerging powers feel somewhat sidelined at the UN Security Council. African, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries also feel sidelined, but it is the Asian powers — because of their emerging economic prowess, their political weight and the sheer size of their population — that seem destined to set the agenda for UN reform. In the 21st century, Asia will undoubtedly flaunt its increased political sophistication. The political consequences would be profound.

The outline of UN reform is emerging even though a radical shake-up of the international organisation is not on the cards. To take the UN and reshape it into a keenly focused and highly rewarding venture is no easy matter. With the Security Council as catalyst, the Asian powers seem to be planning to garner support for their cause by aligning themselves with the rest of the South — and that's no fatuous exhortation.

The chrysanthemum claim

Is it time for Japan to exercise clout in the United Nations? Is Japan ready to take up a permanent seat on the UN Security Council? Is Japan beginning to consider how its economic strength can service the UN? If so, the world would be very unwise to ignore the feelers now being put out by Tokyo.

"Japan is, after the United States of America, the second-ranking economic power in the world in terms of Gross Domestic Product (\$5.1 trillion in 1995). And it is the largest donor nation," Ambassador Yoshio Hatano told Al-Ahram Weekly in Cairo two months ago. Hatano was Japan's ambassador to the UN in New York between 1990 and 1994, during which time Japan was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term. However, Hatano felt that his powers were very limited even when he served as the council's president in 1993.

"With respect to an increase in the permanent membership of the Security Council, Japan is of the view that the election of the countries to be added should be made on the capacity and willingness of the countries concerned to assume global responsibilities," Hatano said. America is \$1.4 billion in arrears to the UN and yet it is a Security Council permanent member. Japan has no such incriminating debts and yet it has no say in the running of the UN.

Let us get some necessary disclaimers on the record first. No, Japan is not immune to economic recession. It is experiencing the most agonising economic slump with an unprecedented three per cent unemployment rate — insignificant by European standards, but unacceptable in Japan. Japan's economic growth rate has plummeted to 0.3 per cent in the first six months of this year. No, the Japanese are not particularly liked by their neighbours for creating a yen-controlled economic zone reminiscent of the pre-World War II Imperial Japanese East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. No, it is not enough for the Japanese taxpayer to bail out the UN; the Japanese must calculate the cost of playing a more responsible role in the UN. And no, Japan is not fanning these issues into flame for purely political reasons.

Japanese diplomats never miss the chance today to explore their Western allies' intentions. "The rise of China, the unification of Korea, the possible shift of the centre of gravity of Russian policy toward Siberia — all have different significance for Japan than they have for the US," former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee early last year.

Japan is also increasing military spending at a faster rate than most Western nations; the Japanese defence agency is pushing for a four per cent rise in defence spending for the fiscal year 1996-96. But in his statement at the 49th session of the UN General Assembly, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Yohsei Kono declared that Japan would not resort to the use of force which is prohibited by its constitution.

No Asian power is likely to challenge the basic precept that in the post-Cold War era, Japan's security continues to rest in the hands of the US nuclear deterrent. According to Ambassador Hatano, "Japan is too big to be regarded solely as an 'Asian' power — Japan is a global power."

Many in Japan and the rest of the world want to see Japan as a permanent member of the UN Security Council before the turn of the century. Today the question must be posed as to whether and how Japan can be included in the decision-making process of the council even though it has no permanent-member status.

In contrast to the ambiguous status of a defeated Japan knocking at the doors of the UN in 1956 and contributing a mere pittance, Japan today is the second largest contributor to UN peace-keeping operations, providing 12.5 per cent of the total costs of such operations, ahead of permanent members of the Security Council such as Russia, France, Britain and China.

"Japan contributed \$4 billion to the Gulf War which amounts to three years of the UN budget. The European Union and the US complained bitterly about the 'modest' Japanese contribution and urged Japan to pay much more for the war effort because Japan, they warned, would suffer most from a third Gulf crisis. Japan was then obliged to pay an additional \$9 billion. In total Japan paid no less than \$13 billion to the Gulf War effort," Hatano explained.

"The US did not thank Japan, and instead complained that Japan made the contributions reluctantly. For me this was a very disappointing episode," he said. "I had to wait in the corridors to find out what was actually going on in the Security Council. I got information second hand from the Japanese and international media and was barred from participating in the deliberations between the five permanent Security Council members even though Japan was the largest financial contributor to the Gulf War effort. Contributor or not, Japan was not a permanent Security Council member and, therefore, had no right to participate in the discussions," Hatano complained bitterly.

Next, Hatano drew an analogy between the Japanese contribution to the UN and the American Revolution. "The Boston Tea Party of 1773 came to a head when the tea duty was lifted in Britain but retained in the British colonies in America. And Americans, in protest, dumped a cargo of tea in the harbour of Boston, Massachusetts," mused Hatano. "The moral of the story is that there is no taxation without representation." He revealed that even in the though Japan had not yet officially requested permanent membership in the Security Council, the issue was subject to nationwide discussion in Japan and he personally felt that Japan should become a permanent member.

"What do we gain from being a permanent member of the Security Council? Would we be in a position to say no to America? Many in Japan are wondering why Japan should be a permanent member of the UN Security Council. For Japanese public opinion, the question of obligations is an overriding consideration," Hatano explained.

"Japan is a great believer in UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali's 'Agenda for Peace'. Japan has a role to play in 'preventive diplomacy' by drawing economic development plans and providing financial aid," said Hatano. Even though Japan is the third largest producer of nuclear power, it is vociferous in promoting nuclear disarmament.

"Japan introduced a draft resolution on nuclear disarmament with a view to the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons at the 49th General Assembly of the UN in 1994," the ambassador added.

"Japan, in conjunction with the UN, has also been active in peace-keeping operations throughout the world. 'Japan's first substantial participation in a UN peace-keeping operation was in 1989, when 27 electoral observers were dispatched to the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia. Then in 1992, the enactment of the International Peace Cooperation Law enabled Japan to send not only its civilian personnel but also Japan's Self-Defence Forces who were dispatched to assist Rwandan refugees in Goma, Zaire, as part of the international humanitarian relief operations," Hatano said.

"Japan wants to listen to the voice of the three-quarters of the UN member-states which constitute the poorer developing nations of the South," the ambassador explained. "Japan's official development assistance programme now features a Global Issues Initiative on Population and AIDS. This is a seven-year programme designed to provide \$3 billion in aid to developing countries to help them combat AIDS and address population- and AIDS-related problems."

Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama represented Japan at the World Summit for Social Development, which took place in the Danish capital Copenhagen in March of 1995. Murayama stressed the importance of developing a "human-centred society", an idea which he said was already taking shape in Japan, and reaffirmed Japan's commitment to promoting education, professional training and technological cooperation, as well as supporting South-South cooperation. It is in this context that he urged the world body to "work expeditiously" to increase the UN Security Council's permanent membership and improve its "working method through enhanced transparency."

At Rio de Janeiro's UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1992, Japan declared its commitment to expand its environment-related official development assistance to between \$7 billion and \$7.75 billion over a five-year period beginning in the fiscal year 1992. It has also channelled considerable funds to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) — an international multilateral funding mechanism affiliated to the UN. In fact, "Japan has pledged to contribute 20 per cent of GEF capital over the next three years," Hatano said. Japan pledged another \$3 billion at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, and was instrumental in ensuring the success of these UN-sponsored conferences.

But the Japanese have not forgotten the days when poverty and destruction were pervasive in the war-torn post-World War II period. "Japan has never forgotten the support it received from many members of the international community in building the economic prosperity it enjoys today," said Premier Murayama at the commemorative meeting in New York last October.



"Don't keep them locked in darkness" read a Bengali poster of one of the 200,000 women who demonstrated against poverty and the repression of women in Dhaka (photo: AP)

There is something old hat about pacing corridors of power. Now and then someone appears out of the woodwork to upset holders of the status quo and tamper with the prerogatives of the powers that be. These days it seems that most far-reaching international transformations are Asian in origin or initiative. The message emanating from Asia sounds something like: "Hang up your hat before we take on the job" and that applies to the running of world bodies, including the United Nations.

It is a small world. Late one wintry Manhattan autumn afternoon, I unexpectedly came across a cherished acquaintance in a saffron sari, Ambassador Arundhati Ghose, a former Indian ambassador to Egypt. She showed up, out of the blue, at the UN headquarters and promptly introduced Ambassador Prakash Shah — India's permanent representative to the UN. Ghose, now based in Geneva, was engaged in gruelling negotiations over an extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

India may have received a brush-off for refusing to sign the NPT, but it is widely acknowledged as a world nuclear player. "The NPT is not a treaty," Ambassador Shah told me the next day in his office. "The NPT does not promote the cause of nuclear disarmament. We should work on a convention banning nuclear weapons in the same way as we have done with chemical and biological weapons," he added.

"Nuclear weapons in the hands of nuclear powers are legitimised under the NPT. Nuclear powers go ahead with the possession and production of nuclear weapons. We need negotiations on a convention governing nuclear weapons and in terms of the elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide," Ambassador Shah explained. Ghose agreed. "For India, it remains a question of unrestricted national sovereignty," the sari-clad diplomat said.

The West's failure to recognise this has long enraged India. And, it was partly in this context that the battle over who sets the UN agenda began in earnest in 1995. The triumph of the newly emerging Asian powers over the vested interests of the North in arresting the democratisation process of the UN appears imminent in 1996. India appears poised to do battle — at least as far as the NPT is concerned.

"It is because of the persistence of India at the UN that the question of the total elimination of nuclear weapons has been raised and supported by numerous countries. As a matter of fact, the issue was raised at the Cartagena summit of the NAM [Non-Aligned Movement] countries [last October]. The NAM resolution on the elimination of nuclear weapons has been fully supported by [a majority] at the UN. The unfortunate question of nuclear testing by existing nuclear powers [the five permanent members of the UN Security Council] has been avoided under the NPT," Ambassador Shah said. International peace and security are not lost because there is a new nuclear power, they are secured by the elimination of nuclear weapons, he explained. "India's independent attitude has principles and logic behind it," Shah added.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali is of the opinion that stopping nuclear testing is a feasible venture for 1996. "I believe that we will be able next June to have a comprehensive ban on all testing. We have already begun to hold discussions in Geneva with the team working on this subject. I will do whatever ought to be done to accelerate this process. If in June we have

reached an agreement on a comprehensive ban on all testing, I believe that this will be the best contribution the UN can make in the field of environment," Ghali said.

"India was the first country at the UN to initiate a resolution calling for the reform of the world body," Ambassador Shah said. He stressed that India has been especially keen to reform the Security Council, and particularly in having the council's character improved so that it is more representative of the General Assembly membership.

"We have an industrial growth rate of over 10 per cent. Our agricultural growth rate is about three per cent. With 950 million people, India is the world's largest democracy and a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic nation, grappling with varying levels of development in different parts of the country. We have adopted market-oriented economic policies, especially where industry and trade are concerned. The government still has an important role to play in the areas of infrastructure and social services provision," Shah said. But, it is precisely this vast experience as a developing country with enormous social and economic problems that is needed to infuse the UN Security Council with new blood, he pointed out.

One of the most persistent contemporary illusions has been that India's relatively low per capita income — a third of its population still lives below the poverty line — hinders it from playing a more dynamic international role. But, it is partly because of its status as a developing country that India has a critical role to play in international politics.

"China, [another developing country] is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, so why not India? Despite our problems, we have been supporting the UN through our contributions. One doesn't have to be the richest country to help out at the UN. Even the US has serious social problems. It is, indeed, true that we have a 20-30 per cent illiteracy rate but that should not stop India from playing a dynamic role in international affairs. In any case, India is working on improving the living standards of its people," Shah said. Widespread poverty and illiteracy should not be made into an excuse to bar India from being a permanent member of the Security Council, he said.

The fact that India has a large diaspora scattered all over the world is a double-edged sword. "Indians have settled in almost all countries the world over," Shah said. The overseas Indians consider themselves as part of the communities or countries they've settled in. Many are entrepreneurs and invest in the host countries — an investment which they see as an investment in their personal future. Sometimes when the Indian minority is large and economically dominant, then suspicions grow among the host community. But overseas Indians generally contribute to the welfare of the host community and to the well-being of its economy. The Indian diaspora is a bridge between India and the world at large.

"In the [aftermath] of the 50th anniversary celebrations, India believes that the UN should focus on trans-border or trans-national issues such as nuclear disarmament, elimination of nuclear weapons, narcotic traffic, international crime, terrorism, peace and security. Economic growth and development issues should be central to UN activities," Shah said. India's ambassador to the UN also believes that human rights and social issues should get back to the fore of the UN agenda. Social development should get prominence in the context of the work of the UN. "They were sidelined in the past because of the UN's increasing focus on peacekeeping activities," he explained.

India has had diplomatic setbacks. But, "India is climbing, firm of step and dedicated of purpose," Ghose said. The warning shots some permanent members have fired at suggestions that India secure a seat in the Security Council raise serious concern, not only in India, but throughout the developing world. If a country like India with nearly one billion people and enormous economic and political potential is denied a permanent seat at the Security Council, then what chance do smaller Third World states have?



Free at last?

National consensus building is never an easy process, especially when nationalist aspirations were marginalised, shunned and rejected by many in the international community. For Yasser Arafat and those Palestinians who will lead to the polls on 20 January to elect a president and 88 council members, this memory, in itself, is the primary barometer for the decided impetus towards a free and democratic state.

But, despite poll results which reveal that 72 per cent of the Palestinians support the Oslo II agreement signed in Washington last September, and that 68 per cent of them indicated they would vote for Arafat in the elections, critics are beginning to voice cries of potential foul play, even before the voting starts.

These nay-sayers also contend that the scores of rejectionist Palestinians, namely supporters of Hamas and the Popular and Democratic Fronts will remain under-represented in the new Palestinian Council — an interesting assertion given that four Hamas members, with the blessing of Hamas' spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, are running as "independents".

It is, however, always easy to find fault with such strident moves as forming a government. After all, not everyone will be pleased all of the time. But, a more prudent policy would be to support these steps towards democracy, however small or problematic they may seem.

With sizable post-election obstacles to overcome, the quest for Palestinian self-determination is but a distant goal on the horizon. One source of concern for Arafat are the strong pockets of opposition which could provide Israeli with a much-wanted pretext to stall or stop withdrawal from various cities. Moreover, with donor assistance more likely than not to be halted in the near future, the PNA's massive budget crisis will only be compounded. In all, this augurs a precarious peace in the areas not yet falling within the PNA's expanding borders. For the Palestinians, and other countries in the region, however, the pace of peace could be largely determined by the outcome of the Palestinian Oslo II-inspired endeavours, making with an open mind the best way to view these elections.

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Main office

AL-AHRAH, Al-Ghaza St. Cairo.
Telephone: 5784100/5782005/5783005/5784005/5785000
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Overseas offices

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Washington DC: Al-Ahram Office, Suite 125, 529 National Press Bldg., Washington DC 20045; Tel: (202) 737-2121/2122.
New York: Al-Ahram Office, 39th Fl., Chrysler Bldg., 405 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10174-0300; Tel: (212) 974-6440; Fax: (212) 974-6440; Telex: 201659346 Fax: (212) 974-6440.

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The Mediterranean's waterworld

Warnings about the impending dangers that will afflict the delta of the Nile in the near future have been circulating for some time. The press had been replete with doomsday scenarios about the imminent inundation of the delta by an encroaching Mediterranean, whose level will rise in response to the thaw of the polar and other ice caps that will come about as a result of global warming. Although the rise in sea level will affect all coastal areas of the world, many have singled out Egypt and Bangladesh as the most vulnerable to this rise; both have large populations living in the delta flats of the Nile and Ganges rivers, which lie barely above sea level. Any rise in sea level will overrun large tracts of land and will chase many millions of people out of their homes.

In addition, the delta, according to one American scientist, is undergoing subsidence, and will, therefore, be inundated at a faster rate. Having drilled and studied a few shallow wells in the northern reaches of the delta, this scientist came up with the conclusion that the delta is subsiding at a very fast rate under the weight of its own sediments and that if this rate continues in the future, disaster will befall Egypt and will dislocate millions of people within the span of the coming 50 years. Although this conclusion is based on evidence that I believe is flawed and contrary to known historical fact, the idea of an impending disaster of such dimensions caught the attention of both the scientific community and the press. After all, getting access to the media or raising funds for scientific research is considerably easier if one boasts sensational results such as these.

Despite their appeal, these dooms-

day scenarios should be treated with caution. Although most scientists would agree that the world will witness a warming trend in the near future as a result of the increased use of fossil fuels, many would judge these scenarios to be highly questionable and would consider the subject of future climatic fluctuations to be dominated by speculation rather than by well-founded argument.

Our ability to perfect the necessary modelling and predictive skills in this subject is hampered by the fact that we do not have as yet a comprehensive knowledge of all the factors that determine future trends of the climate. Nevertheless, and whatever the future may bring in the way of climatic fluctuations, one thing is certain and should alleviate our fears: the degree and speed of change in the foreseeable future will be such as to make it manageable. Problems of coastal inundation, shoreline adjustments and riverine flooding in a warmer Egypt will occur, it seems, at rates that can well be managed.

In spite of the fact that there is little that Egypt can do to forestall the impending dangers of an encroaching sea on a subsiding delta, many of the doomsday advocates are advancing ideas to face this situation. Most would advocate the funding of basic research to better understand the phenomenon of global warming, to perfect its modelling and to improve our predictive skills. Others, especially the engineers and contractors, would go a step further and lobby for funds to carry out feasibility studies of giant

structures that could be built to encircle the endangered shores. The most grotesque of all these latter projects is the recently revived project of damming the Gibraltar Strait in order to block the only passage by which the Mediterranean Sea is in free communication with the world ocean system. The damming of the strait would convert the sea into a lake whose waters, according to the project, would be drained into the depressions surrounding its coasts in order to lower its level. This way the coastal areas would not only be saved from erosion or inundation, but all countries overlooking the Mediterranean would gain new land as the Mediterranean "lake" level became lower and its shores advanced seaward.

This idea was floated at the beginning of the century by a French visionary and has been picked up lately by the eminent Egyptian architectural engineer Sayed Karim. But if the project had any acceptance at the beginning of the century, it certainly has none today. Today all large artificial structures are looked upon with suspicion, not only because of their impact on the environment but also because of their poor showing in cost-benefit analysis. I know of no international donor or responsible government which would be interested in funding a project of these dimensions, and I doubt that any reputable scientist would find it even worthy of consideration. The world has found out during this century that the impact of such structures on the balance of nature is enormous and detrimental.

In addition, the Gibraltar "barage" would be an impossible engineering feat. Its mere dimensions are staggering. It would span 30 kilometres in length and rise more than 320 metres in height. I know of no structure that human beings have ever built that is that high; the Khufu great pyramid is barely half that height. The amount of stone, or fill, that would be required to make that mighty structure would be about 5,000 to 7,000 million cubic metres (compared to a mere 40 million cubic metres for the Aswan High Dam). In case the advocates of the project have missed the problems here, an inspection of the configuration of the strait's bottom shows the shallowest point to be on the high ridge (dubbed "all" in oceanographic terminology) which separates the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and is 320 metres deep. The width of the strait at this point is about 30 kilometres.

In addition, the building of a barage here would have far-reaching effects on the entire Mediterranean region. It would prevent the free exchange of water between the Mediterranean sea and the Atlantic, since the more saline and heavier surface waters of the sea would sink and remain at the bottom, having been prevented from moving across the sill to the Atlantic to be replaced by a surface flow from that ocean. The result would be a more saline environment, which would ultimately decimate the entire marine life of the sea. The lowering of the sea level would also cause the rivers flowing

into it to deepen their channels to cope with the new level, and would cause the land to undergo faster rates of erosion, leading to the loss of fertile top soil. This would have disastrous effects on the agriculture of the entire Mediterranean region. Lowering the sea level would also ruin all present-day ports, which would no longer be on the coast as the sea receded. The cost of adjusting to this new situation would be prohibitive. These are only a few of the disastrous effects that could come about if we were to prevent the free circulation of the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Some six million years ago a similar situation occurred naturally. At that time an enormous earth movement caused the sill below the straits of Gibraltar, which separates the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, to rise above sea level, thus severing the Mediterranean from the world ocean system. The result was the conversion of the Mediterranean Sea into a lake which over time dried up and was converted into a desert of salt as its water evaporated. In response to the continuous lowering of the level of the sea, the River Nile excavated its channel and deepened it until it formed a canyon that was longer, deeper and as awe-inspiring as the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The effects of that cataclysmic event must have been enormous; fortunately, there were no human beings living at the time to suffer the consequences of this enormous and far-reaching calamity.

The writer is a US-based professor of geology and former chairman of the Egyptian Organisation for Geological Surveying.

Misplaced optimism?

High hopes are pinned on the resumption of the Israeli-Syrian talks. Mohamed Sid-Ahmed questions whether the optimism should not be moderated

At the joint press conference held in Cairo following the last summit meeting between Presidents Mubarak and Assad, the Syrian president declared that the Israeli-Syrian talks had so far addressed generalities, not specifics, a statement that is difficult to reconcile with the current optimistic predictions of a breakthrough on the Syrian front. Hopes of a radical change cannot be pinned on the declared readiness of the protagonists to exhibit flexibility, nor, for that matter, on the new mechanism proposed for the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. The previous mechanism which ended in stalemate followed a linear course, addressing one difficulty after the other. This is to be replaced by a non-linear approach, in which the parties depart from the recognition that the contentious issues between them are so interrelated that they must be dealt with simultaneously. However, the new multilateral approach will by no means reduce the complexity of negotiations between parties without a common frame of reference or direct relations at the summit level.

It can be argued that the concerned parties have every interest in achieving quick results. A breakthrough on the Syrian front is crucial for the Peres government before the Israeli parliamentary election next June, which could replace the need for a national plebiscite on the issue of peace. And, with the US presidential elections coming up next fall, Clinton is interested in proving that Washington's sponsorship of the Syrian-Israeli talks has been no less successful than its sponsorship of other Arab-Israeli negotiations or of the Dayton talks on Bosnia. There is also Peres's realisation that a settlement with Syria now would be less costly in terms of lost opportunities than it would in the future, and Assad's realisation that with Israeli-Palestinian negotiations set to address the unresolved key issues of Jerusalem, the settlements and Palestinian sovereignty this year, Syria cannot afford to stay on the sidelines. Assad is aware too that Rabin's absence from the scene has deprived the Israeli Labour government of much of the credibility it enjoyed with the silent majority, and that if negotiations stall on the Syrian front,

this would lend credence to the Likud argument that the peace process has compromised Israel's security without offering it the benefits of an overall peace.

The question remains, however, how to overcome the discrepancy between the will of the parties and a mechanism that does not help them translate this will into reality. The easiest way might seem to be the initiation of direct negotiations between Assad and Peres, but before Assad can embark on any such venture, he must receive assurances from Israel, through unilateral statements of intent, that conditions are now ripe for the peace process to become irreversible. Of course, Israel will require counter-assurances in return. Peres has already taken steps in this direction, declaring that Israel is prepared to pay the price of peace with Syria, and that it is now ready to negotiate without prior conditions. Still, these expressions of good faith do not meet Syrian hopes for a declaration of principle that would provide the negotiations with a clear perspective of what their ultimate objective is. The Nine Points proposed by Israel as a procedural framework for the resumption of negotiations make a distinction between the issues of contention, such as the extent of withdrawal from the Golan and the nature of peace, and those which are amenable to solution, such as the water problem in the Golan and the post-peace prospects. The statements of intent required at this juncture should touch on the issues of contention, such as a unilateral Israeli declaration recognising Syria's sovereignty over the Golan.

The most promising statement to emerge so far from the Israeli side is Security Minister Moshe Shabai's declaration that "Israel is occupying the Golan not for historical reasons, but for strategic reasons," and that "the time has come to use this card in exchange for real peace." In other words, if peace is achieved, Israel would no longer need to retain the Golan. On the other hand, Israeli daily *Yediot Aharanot* attributed to the Syrian negotiators the unofficial statement that, in exchange for a total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan and Lebanon, Syria is ready to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel.

Peres's recent admission that Israel has a

nuclear capability which it is ready to relinquish in exchange for peace with all states of the region, though made in a different context, could serve as a precedent for the unilateral statements of intent we are proposing. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa has described the admission as "positive", though requiring "further clarification". Indeed, many Arab parties still believe that Israel's insistence on considering its nuclear capability, along with the issues of Jerusalem and Palestinian sovereignty, non-negotiable makes the peace process closer to a dilution than to an equitable arrangement. Nor have their apprehensions been allayed by the attempt made by Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak to downplay the importance of Peres's admission with his declaration that "Israel's nuclear policy has not changed, because it is an issue that does not touch on tactics or politics, but is vital for Israel's future generations". Who should we believe, Israel's prime minister Peres, or its former chief-of-staff, Barak?

The real significance of Peres's statement is that it has lifted the veil of secrecy, and hence, ambivalence, in which Israel's nuclear capability has for so long been shrouded. Now that Israel's nuclear capability is a matter of public record, it is hard to see how Israel can continue to insist on keeping it off the agenda of the peace talks. And, once it is included on the agenda, it constitutes a precedent for all the issues of contention that Israel considers non-negotiable.

One of the most critical aspects of Rabin's assassination is that it has demonstrated the fallacy of the Israeli belief that their political differences, unlike those of the Arabs, do not erupt into violence but are played out within the framework of their institutions. It is now clear that Israelis do kill other Israelis for political reasons, including the prime minister. What is still more serious is that though the main opposition party, Likud, condemns violence as a mode of political expression, they share the killer's view that the current peace process undermines Israel's very identity. With such a deep division in its ranks, Israel would be mistaken to believe that it alone holds all the cards.

1995 reviewed

By Naguib Mahfouz



Two important achievements took place internationally in 1995. The first was the latest Palestinian-Israeli interim agreement and preparations for the Palestinian Council elections. The second was the Bosnian truce, which, despite its shortcomings, will at least inject fresh hope into the lives of those who have been under threat of destruction over the last few years.

Following on from these events come prospects for an agreement between Israel and Syria, this after many years of deadlock. Israel had previously failed to display an inclination for an agreement, and the Syrians had not shown much enthusiasm for one that failed to guarantee the return of the Golan Heights.

However, in the last few months of 1995 Israel seemed to realise the importance of peace with Syria, thereby demonstrating a conviction that peace in the region would remain fragmentary so long as the circle was incomplete.

Syria showed exceptional flexibility when it agreed to negotiate with Israel without a prior Israeli commitment to specific conditions.

Last year offered real opportunities towards the achievement of the kind of comprehensive peace that has long been overdue in the region. The important question now is whether these opportunities can be exploited further this year.

The two main negative features of the past year were terrorism and natural disaster. The attempted assassination of President Mubarak was a serious incident despite its unexpectedly positive consequences; popular protest against the attempt amounted to a vindication of the President's popularity and of the people's affection towards him. The bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan struck at the heart of the nation.

Last year's natural disasters seem to supply the moral that our negligence was, to a large extent, responsible for the losses incurred. I am referring here to the recent train crash disaster, the worst of its kind in Egyptian history. In this instance, we cannot lay the blame on fate alone, since the human role in the incident should not be underestimated either.

Based on an interview by Mohamed Sabawy.

The Press This Week

By Hassan Fouad

ROUND-UPS of 1995 and predictions for 1996 featured in most of the nation's press this week. Al-Mussawwar published a photo-montage on its cover, dubbing it the most important picture of 1996. The montage depicts Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad sitting with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and surrounded by US President Clinton, President Mubarak, King Hussein, Lebanese President Hrawi and Head of the Palestinian National Authority Yasser Arafat.

Inside, Editor-in-Chief Makram Mohamed Ahmed, wrote: "The outstanding feature of this year is that it may be the year for a comprehensive peace settlement. There is a good chance that Assad will shake hands with Peres, beginning a new phase in the Middle East peace process."

There is a good chance that the ice on the Syrian-Israeli track will thaw and that President Assad will shake hands with Israeli Premier Shimon Peres, beginning a new phase in the Middle East peace process. If this takes place, then the picture of 1996 will be one drawn by President Clinton, who promises that the Syrian-Israeli peace agreement will be signed soon at a large ceremony at the White House.

that this will happen in 1996 since Shimon Peres is serious in his quest for peace with Syria and desires a comprehensive peace with the Arabs. He would like to see a new Middle East order in which Israel would have a special place, peacefully co-existing with its neighbours. But Peres faces an Israeli society which is divided over the issue of peace and hawks in the military and government who may hinder their stances on the pretext that Is-

raeli security would be compromised by a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights." In October magazine the cover story was entitled "Peace with Israel and Arab rapprochement". Editor-in-Chief Ragab El-Banna wrote a three-page article in which he said: "Talk about peace with Israel, which is proceeding in many fields, should be accompanied by talk about an Arab rapprochement. It is

illogical that hostilities between the Arabs and Israel should come to an end while differences between Arab states continue. And it is also illogical that the deterioration in Iraq should continue to reach a desperate state of hunger for the Iraqi people and a state of division which threatens the unity of that nation."

Rose El-Youssef's predictions for 1996 include: a limited Egyptian cabinet reshuffle which will involve 6-8 ministers and a larger number of governors; tension on the border between Egypt and Sudan next summer; the promulgation of a new press law after the deletion of the imprisonment clause and the retention of fines; the disgrace of the national football team upon return from Johannesburg; the defeat of the Egyptian sports mission to Atlanta; President Hafez Al-Assad as star of the year after signing an agreement with Israel in autumn and receiving the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of the year; the breakdown of the Bosnia peace accord; Tansu Ciller's declining popularity; and the weakening of the yen against the dollar.

Editor-in-Chief Mahmoud El-Tobani wrote an article entitled "1996 - Strengthening peace with democracy", in which he said, "With the advent of a final peace settlement in the Middle East, we should ask 'What next?' Have we really achieved peace? I do not think so. Achieving peace, in my opinion, means getting rid of the notion of total hostility towards democratic political groups who differ in opinion with the government."

In Al-Ahram, Salama Ahmed Salama wrote in his daily column, under the title "50 years in vain", that the world during 1995 celebrated the 50th anniversary of three important events - dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, the end of the Second World War and the creation of the United Nations. He said: "After 50 years the world has failed to stop nuclear testing, suppress Nazi and Fascist groups, close down concentration camps, or prevent ethnic cleansing. There is no solution to the problems the United Nations was created to solve. As a result, 50 years of human experience have passed in vain - the threat of nuclear war remains, racism and the

Anticipating '96

ture camps remain and the principles of international justice have not been attained." On the occasion of the start of the newly-elected People's Assembly term, under the headline "Our rights", Ahmed Ragab wrote in his front-page weekly column in Al-Ahram El-Yom: "Since the People's Assembly has approved the televising of its sessions, it is my right to see sessions in full rather than bits and pieces. It is my right to see the speaker read out the names of

approval or does he not vote because he is fast asleep? Is his conduct respectable or does he go around begging for ministers' signatures? I want to sit in front of the television set to see how the future of my family is determined. I do not want to lose interest and switch over to watch *Boogie* and *Tuntum* [a children's programme]."

On the same page, Ibrahim Se'ada, editor-in-chief of Al-Ahram El-Yom, wrote an article entitled "Ignorance and backwardness" in which he said: "Terrorism is not only throwing bombs and killing innocent people, it is also an attempt to intimidate writers by dragging them to the courts and threatening to take action against them."

On the back page of Al-Ahram El-Yom, Mawafa Amini wrote in his column, "The Egyptian press has become a vulnerable target. Every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to file a suit against a journalist in order to implicate him. It is not enough that we have to contend with the new press law? Now everyone who wants his name published by the news agencies files a suit against a journalist."

Close up

Salama A. Salama

Democratic transition 1995 - 1996

Last year the world witnessed a number of important electoral battles in a great number of countries, East and West, and equally this year will witness a number of no less significant electoral battles, especially in the West. These contests may well lead to international change in a variety of directions, thus affecting a number of current issues and regional balances of power. Whether they took place in 1995, or will take place in 1996, these elections will certainly govern change in the world political arena until the end of this century and well into the next one.

It is worth noting, however, that the elections that took place last year did not have a decisive impact on the process of democratisation in the world. This has been the case in Egypt as in Russia, Turkey and Algeria.

In Egypt, the overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats remained in the hands of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) — limiting the space available for opposition and party pluralism. In Russia, political forces were so fragmented that none was able to win a sufficient majority to enable it to change the status quo. And despite the Communist Party obtaining a larger number of seats, real power remained in the hands of President Yeltsin. In Turkey, change came in the opposite direction, as the success of the Islamic Rafah Party in obtaining a majority at the elections has put the whole secularist regime in Turkey in jeopardy, with all the consequences this may hold for the country in 1996.

In Poland, though the new Communists have managed to achieve a substantial victory, this will, nevertheless, have to be coupled with a deal of adaptation on the part of the current Polish government if the country is to meet the challenges of political and economic changes. These will come as the consequence of the Poles' ambition to join mainstream Europe and its various institutions, a cause that the former Communist parties have made their own.

In Algeria, the presidential elections have helped to create a breathing space, to some extent, which may aid in finding a solution to the Algerian dilemma. The elections also clearly showed the extent to which the Algerian people have become fed up with political violence in all its forms. Nevertheless, this positive result may quickly evaporate; if no rapid action is taken to put an end to violence and terrorism is taken, then the positive gains of the election may well be lost.

The electoral battles scheduled for 1996 are expected to be decisive: top of the list here is the American presidential election, which is already exerting preliminary pressures. Parallel to these, the general elections in Israel, where for the first time the prime minister will be elected on a separate ticket, are equally significant. Needless to say both campaigns will have definite impact on the advance of the peace process in the Middle East and on the stability of the region.

In a few days time the world will witness the first elections for a Palestinian Legislative Council. A presidential election for the Palestinian National Authority (PLA) will also be elected by direct ballot. And, again, it goes without saying that the world will judge the Palestinian democratic experience, and, for that matter, the whole democratic process in the Arab World, by comparison with how the elections are conducted in Israel.

As for what 1996 holds for Western Europe, the 1995 French elections were an important indication as far as the results of other elections in the future are concerned. In Spain, the ruling Socialist Party is set to enter a fierce battle that threatens its continuing rule; in Italy, the domestic situation, which gets more complicated by the day, may well see early elections, and these will come at the same time as Italy holds the presidency of the European Union. In Britain, the prime minister, John Major, is facing problems that may lead him to announce general elections before their scheduled date. If we add to this list the presidential elections in Russia, which will decide both the fate of Yeltsin and the future of the economic reform programme, then the one sure prediction that we can make is that in 1996 the world will see many new faces and many new directions.

Comagla?



Whither the future?

Ismail Sabri Abdallah hails an initiative intended to combat a dearth of future scenarios

What will Egypt look like in the year 2020? Surely we need an image of where we want to be in the future to assess what is going on now, and what should be done, in the national economy and in society as a whole. But, till now we have had only comparisons with Nasser's revolutionary period, with Sadat's *hifayah* and with a sometimes fictitious image of Farouk's regime. But what we undertake today will affect not the past but the future.

Some actions can be obviously commendable in the short or medium terms and become disastrous in the long term. A good example is the case of housing in Greater Cairo. In the fifties the government invested heavily in social housing. This eased the crisis provoked by the arrival of building during the World War II. But in the longer term this investment increased the full effect of emigration from rural areas to the capital. Doing more of the same placed Cairo on the short list of ungovernable megacities.

Yet Egypt has the means of building alternative scenarios for its future. The expertise is available and waits only to be mobilised. No list of good wishes can ever, after all, be a replacement for the kind of concrete scientific endeavour made possible thanks to progress in informatics and modelling.

The good news is that a group of research

workers gathered by the Third World Forum is currently preparing a major project called Egypt 2020. The preliminary phase includes setting a provisional list of national long term goals, identifying constraints, planning the study of present prevailing trends in all sectors, selecting appropriate models, setting a timetable and budget schedule and budget.

It is, of course, impossible and completely useless to define goals in monetary terms. In the first place there is an absence of a stable reference currency. Yet on the other hand it would be senseless to provide a list of development projects for implementation during the coming 25 years. What the project aims to produce is a set of feasible scenarios among which the decision maker is able to choose. Scientific research in this area aims only at enlightening the politicians, in creating options and showing the positive and negative consequences of each option.

It is important in this process that human and sustainable development aspects are retained. Every Egyptian child must be able to fulfil its physical and mental growth needs; illiteracy, actual and functional, must be

eradicated; job opportunities must be created for every citizen able and willing to work; individuals must be provided with at least six square metres of covered habitation; the plight of the very poorest members of society must be alleviated.

To achieve these targets an average rate of economic growth of at least six per cent is needed — i.e. a rate at least three times higher than projected demographic growth. There is nothing shocking in this rate. It was achieved by Egypt in the early sixties and late seventies. Some developing countries realised an average of eight to ten per cent over long periods. Our choice of six per cent is prudent if not a bit conservative. Yet it is necessary to address the base of all development, namely population and natural resources.

It is a commonplace that politicians justify their limited success by pretending that the population growth "swallows" most of the benefits of economic growth. In Egypt this has ceased to be a valid argument. Since the late sixties Egypt has been located on the descending part of the demographic transition

curve. According to World Bank figures, the birthrate declined from 40 per thousand in 1970 to 31 per thousand in 1992. The most significant demographic indicator is the fertility rate: it was 5.9 in 1970 and 3.8 in 1992. The expected rate of population growth in 2000 is estimated at 1.7 per cent, which will fall to 1.5 per cent, to be on a par with levels in South Korea and Argentina.

We have limited natural resources. Land suitable for reclamation does not exceed 2 million feddans, and some of it is of very poor quality. Water supply is even worse. According to international treaties, it is entitled to 55.8 billion cubic metres from the Nile, a figure that might decrease if Ethiopia embarks on large scale irrigation projects. (80 per cent of the Nile water that reaches Egypt comes from the Ethiopian plateau.) As for minerals, except for iron the country has no significant deposits of any metal.

Oil will become too expensive to extract around 2017. Natural gas is more abundant, provided it is not exported. The quantity of extractable coal in Sinai is negligible by international standards. People remain our only

mine of wealth. People, then, must be educated and trained.

Egypt is currently exporting its educated and skilled "excess labour" as a raw material. The \$6 billion in workers' remittances is presently the major source of foreign currency, but the other side of the coin is that there is no addition to productive assets corresponding to this revenue. In the National Accounts system the \$6 billion does not figure in gross domestic product (GDP) but in the gross national product (GNP). And as with any raw material, the country of origin would reap the greatest benefits if it also undertook the processing.

One can only raise the productivity of labour through advancing human development. Egypt 2020 can only point out a pathway, producing insights into how manufacturing and inter-sectoral relations be directed vis-à-vis correlated technological change.

But hopefully Egypt 2020 will attract the attention of other research centres and invite them to embark on the business of scanning the future across all sectors in an attempt to plot Egypt's socio-economic matrix of Egypt.

The writer is head of the Third World Forum and former minister of planning.



This week's Soapbox speaker is a professor of laboratory medicine at Ain Shams University. Samir Hanna Sadek

Too early to celebrate

Looking back at 1995, Hassan Nafa'a argues that the era of American peace may prove very short

Events in 1995 have further revealed trends at both regional and international levels. We have only to recall the decisive crisis created by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to realise that a new epoch in the development of the international and Middle-East systems is in the making. The broad lines of this epoch were, to a great extent, carved out by the way in which the Gulf crisis was handled.

At that time, in 1990, the slogan of the "New World Order" was one which resounded from one end of the world to the other, and was on the lips of all world leaders. The United Nations Security Council, like some *jin* that had finally been released from the long captivity of the Cold War, was now free, and could solemnly declare that the latter struggle was over. The United States, the largest debtor to the United Nations, and one which had for many years shown its disdain for the organisation and had waged a fierce war against it, exercising manifold political and financial pressures, was suddenly zealous to pay its arrears. Within this context, many believed that the New World Order meant

that the United Nations was on the way to taking into its hands the reins of a global administration, giving force to the principles and standards enunciated in its charter.

This belief, however, turned out to represent the tip of a rather different iceberg; the truth of the matter, or rather the hidden mass of the iceberg in question, was that the United States rather than the United Nations was to hold the reins of global administration. The United States held all the threads necessary to implement its policies, pulling the relevant ones when the Gulf crisis developed, mobilising forces, distributing costs and assigning roles. A voiceless debate seemed to be taking place between "idealists", who had aspired to a new world led by the United Nations, and "realists", who had intuitively realised that we were at the threshold of a New World Order dominated by the United States.

Over the years 1990-1995, much was said about the collapse of the Old World Order, and the growth of

the embryonic new one, which, however, is still to be born. And now, at the start of 1996, no green shoot has appeared in the debris. The United Nations celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in a sad and sombre atmosphere; manifestations of joy were severely curtailed by the financial constraints that are threatening the organisation with virtual bankruptcy. Its latest peace-keeping task has been a fiasco.

The expectation that 1995 would witness the rejuvenation of the United Nations evaporated, and the year instead proved to be the very embodiment of the organisation's failures. Instead of being a year of advance, 1995 was one of repeated withdrawals, first from Somalia and then from Bosnia, and this latter was not an honourable withdrawal. The UN's unfulfilled peacekeeping role was swiftly filled by the United States.

Possibly because 1995 was an election year in the USA, it was a year of peace agreements that bore

the seal of the United States. The list of agreements includes those affecting the Middle East, the Balkans and Northern Ireland. This "American peace", however, does not necessarily carry with it the implication of stability nor a promise for the well-being of mankind. Violence is still being exercised in many places, and is taking on new forms and using different weapons. Violence, in fact, has been the most remarkable phenomenon of the year, and one which has been a global rather than an Arab or a regional phenomenon. The Oklahoma bombing in the United States, the Supreme Truth murders on Japan's underground and similar incidents in London attest to this truth. More recently, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, and the attempt on the life of President Mubarak are among a series of attempts on the lives of world leaders, which even Clinton and Mandela did not completely escape.

While violence may have subsided a little with the recent peace achieve-

ments, the withdrawal of Israel from Palestinian towns, and the assumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, these have not been enough to ease tensions. In fact new areas of tension are surfacing. In Saudi Arabia, a recent series of acts of violence have targeted the Saudi regime as much as they have targeted the US presence in the peninsula. The conflict that has spread from Al-Bab Al-Ahmar at the Bab Al-Mandab over the island of Haniish Al-Kubra in the Gulf smacks of Israeli manipulation. And the fragility of the Egyptian-Israeli peace became apparent once again during the problems attendant on the renewal of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty over the Israeli nuclear programme. A deeply set hatred was expressed in the confession of an Israeli war veteran who admitted having killed Egyptian prisoners of war in the 1956 and 1967 wars. Fear and tension mounted once again at the American Congress' decision to transfer the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem,

and at Israel's tireless reiteration that "Jerusalem was the united eternal capital of Israel".

While events themselves confirm the truth that we are living in the epoch of an US rather than an UN peace, other events seem to give some further clue as to the future. At the global level, a turn in the tide can be foreseen in Russia and in the eastern European countries, where communist political parties seem to be making a come-back. At the regional level, the success of the Rafah Islamic Party in Turkey in winning a majority of the seats in parliament is significant. Such events would seem to insinuate that socialist-democratic regimes may be sprouting from the ruins of socialist and Soviet ones. "Moderate" Islamic parties seem to be on the rise in the Middle East and in the Islamic world in general. If such a turn in events is already to be seen at the end of 1995, it might be interpreted to mean that the epoch of the "American peace" could be shorter than many have expected.

The writer is professor of political science at Cairo University.

To The Editor

Misrepresented

Sir—I was surprised to see my statements misrepresented in the article entitled, "Terrorism tops 1995 events" (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 28 December - 3 January). The correct statement was, "The government, afraid of stretching the space of freedom allowed for the press, had to put restrictions to curb such freedom as early as possible. Such freedom was considered by the government as an abuse."

I would be very grateful if you could publish this correction.
Dr Hoda Badran
Chairperson
Alliance for Arab Women

No audience

Sir—in his weekly column "Plain Talk" (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 7-13 December), Mursi Saad El-Din expressed concern over the half empty performances of the very good ensemble of the Opera. We would like to provide some examples of the very bad performance of the advertising department of the Opera.

The opera "La Traviata" was scheduled to be performed from 27-30 November 1995. We went by train from Alexandria to Cairo on the 30th only to find the show cancelled. There was no mention in the *Weekly* or the *Hebdo* of the cancellation.

Another example is the gala concert given in the Sayed Darwish theatre on 8

December 1995, in Alexandria. There was also no mention of the concert in any of the papers. It was only by sheer luck that we knew about the gala concert. The theatre was nearly empty and we knew quite a few people who would have loved to attend had they been aware of the concert. What a tragedy that such excellent singers and musicians had to perform for nearly no audience.
Uhrake Kremming
Jana Reinwald

A children's Weekly

Sir—I was elated when I read about *Al-Ahram Weekly's* offer for a monthly or annually subscription. I look forward to every issue of the paper, but sometimes, it is very difficult to find it.

So, as a teacher of English, I hurried to tell our headmaster about this offer. He agreed to subscribe in order to use the paper as a resource for our classes' current events wall magazine.

Let me suggest that you publish an English language children's magazine or newspaper to introduce children to English at an early age. Such a publication would benefit both children and teachers who use the paper for resource material. I hope you consider our suggestion.
Abeer Farouk
Refaa Al-Tahawi School
Sharqiya

Reflections By Hani Shukrallah

A booming voice falls silent

He was possibly one of the least diplomatic of diplomats to have served in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. Confrontational, uncompromising, possessed of a loud booming voice and very little respect for authority, Councillor Anas Mustafa Kamel was also a graduate of what one may euphemistically call the "Class of '72" — that trouble-making group of nationalist-cum-left wing student activists who in the early 1970s were convinced they had every right to tell President Sadat what to do, and in the process save the country from national humiliation, foreign domination, injustice and authoritarianism.

My friend and classmate Anas Mustafa Kamel, 42, died of a sudden heart attack this week in Beirut, where he was serving on the staff of the Egyptian Embassy. A graduate of Cairo University's Faculty of Economics and Political Science, (1974), he was among the most brilliant scholars to have come out of this elite college. As a student, he took his political science studies more seriously than most of us, and was deeply interested in the history of Arab political thought. My clearest recollections of him during our university days were his booming voice, the huge volumes held under his arm, and the image of him standing in the faculty corridors, arguing, almost always, heatedly.

It took time for Anas to "settle down". He spent nearly a decade after graduation suing the Foreign Ministry and writing prolifically. Having passed the Foreign Ministry's grueling entrance exams with flying colours, the ministry had then refused to take him for "security considerations", namely his record of student activism. None of his friends, and I suspect even Anas himself, took the court case he initiated against the ministry very seriously. We appreciated the nuisance value of the case, but few believed that a former student activist and on-going trouble-maker could be allowed into the highly polished corridors of Egyptian diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Anas did little to endear himself to the powers that be. He published in the weekly *Rose El-Youssef*, in *Al-Ahram's* international politics quarterly journal, *Al-Shayssa Al-Dawia* and its weekly economic magazine, *Al-Ahram Al-Iqtisadi*, and took part in several research projects of the *Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies*. The series he wrote on the history of Jewish capitalism in Egypt was a cover story in *Al-Ahram Al-Iqtisadi* for several weeks, and triggered intense debate. His published books and studies on post-revolutionary Iran are considered by many to be among the most authoritative in the Arabic language.

The Foreign Ministry had finally taken Anas on, and I have little doubt that its top

officials soon realised that had he not virtually forced his way in, they should have been out recruiting him. Finesse is not the only requirement of a diplomat, and I am certain that in the Foreign Ministry's filing cabinets there are outstanding scholarly works on Burundi, Iran and Lebanon. Anas's three overseas postings — in the shape of confidential embassy reports. His postings were indicative of the ministry's recognition of his abilities as a political analyst, and he is credited with having invented the concept of "preventive diplomacy", while serving in Burundi.

Confrontational and uncompromising he may have been, but he was also a very affectionate and loyal friend, with a great sense of humour.

That he was a happy man at the time of his sudden and untimely death is a source of some solace and deep regret. He loved his job, and talked of his work with the same kind of passion he had possessed as a student activist. And possibly more importantly, he had finally found and married the woman of his dreams. Randa, and together they had produced two wonderful children. I hope that as they grow up, six-year-old Lamma and four-year-old Mohamed will take some solace in realising that their father was an exceptional and well-loved man.

While ye may

David Blake gathers roses on thin ice

Cairo Symphony Orchestra; New Year's Concert; Cairo Symphony Orchestra; Yvonne Barclay, soprano; Ahmed El-Saedi, conductor; Main Hall, Cairo Opera House; 31 December

What do you feel about the Blue Danube and New Year's Eve? At this time every year they are bracketed together for many people in Cairo. Danube, new year, nostalgia for the past year, hope and hopes for the coming one. Add the city of Vienna, and the dish is irresistibly rich and glamorous.

Vienna stages such a ball every New Year's Eve in the Staatsoper. It is as much a part of the city as the river itself. The Danube means Vienna and Vienna means music. The magic knot is formed.

The ceremony has been repeated in Cairo in somewhat reduced circumstances by the Austrian Cultural Centre. It is a festival of the Danube on the Nile. It has become almost as popular as football viewing. It has everything — the lovely Cairo Opera House of spacious vistas, the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and its conductor Ahmed El-Saedi and usually a star soprano in festive froths with flowers galore in banks on and around the big stage. The atmosphere envelops and throws itself recklessly at the chilly Cairo audience but the courage pays off. The audience is huge and it really claps. And at the end, when El-Saedi lets things rip with Strauss's *Radetzky March*, this collection of what is almost a cross-section of the Cairo public lets its hair down. The mink-coated and bejewelled meet boys in shirt sleeves and all get to their feet and root as if for a rugger match.

Will it all go on forever? These two river cities have their rivers in common. They have swallowed up every power that has sought to occupy them with irresistible irony. In the end they are related to nothing but themselves. They have a unique historical human presence — living, not nostalgic, Nile and Danube, musical souls.

There was more soul than usual at the latest of these concerts. From the roseate cabin of a stage framed in red flowers and velvet curtains, the Cairo Symphony Orchestra gave a warm and stylish flow of sound to the *Fledermaus* overture and the *Wiener Blut* waltz. The two opening pieces were followed by a sad, strong song from Johann Strauss's seldom heard opera *Indigo*.

The evening's soprano, Scot Yvonne Barclay, sang this song with a bright, light tone and then followed it with something completely different, *Meine Herr Marquis*, a showpiece of the soprano in *Die Fledermaus*. Like all Strauss this is bright and brilliant. And Barclay has both these qualities. She is breezy and confident, and has a voice that gets fuller as it rises to high tones.

After the *Perpetuum Mobile* of Strauss, the soprano sang Karl Zeller's song about the roses of Tyrol. This needed a fuller voice in the middle than Barclay possesses. But she knows so well how to put these operetta pieces over — and they are ex-



Yvonne Barclay

tremely difficult to sing — that she sounded authentically Viennese which is what the evening was about. Almost the best known of all waltzes, *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, then came, played with a soft, silky tone. The Cairo Symphony Orchestra did well in catching its sunset, languishing, end-of-era sadness.

These waltzes go on and on, defying time, history and repetition. You can tire of almost all music if it goes through the grind of over exposure, but not, it seems, of these waltzes. Even Mahler loses his patina if mimicked by constant use. The *Vienna Woods*, it is apparent, keeps its freshness in spite of not being so green anymore. Was

the Danube ever blue? But both green and blue join to make a great city of Vienna.

As you listen to the Cairo Symphony Orchestra, under El-Saedi, going through Strauss, the murky side of the Danube-Vienna story seldom appears: the dark world of Mayerling and how empires are made to work, Freud and his surrounding painters, poets and playwrights. Baron Ochs of *Rosenkavalier* waltzing through a scatological nightmare, all are kept under wraps. The Danube can be icy and dark, but never in Strauss. Who cares about the shadows when the froth on the top is so ravishing? That is, if you like the waltz. There are

another one coming. We can only sink once but the Danube will always be there.

The bright coloured streamers snap in the air from well-wishers on the wharf. Our last contact with the land of yesteryear is gone. And El-Saedi and his band thump out the Strauss *Radetzky March*. The members of the big audience have their moment. They stand to clap as the military rhythms thunder on. Where is the Cairo Opera House? In Vienna or Budapest? And in what era? Is it all to begin again as before? Or...

The applause continues — enjoyment, pleasure, release. Plenty. Enough. Happy New Year.

other dances, but none so alluring to hear or see.

After the intermission came Strauss polkas and swirling variations thereon. And then Lehar, the genius who, in his melody, paints the lot — the entire world of the River Danube, the falling stars and shooting fireworks, coalesce into a sheer poetry of despair which so beguiles listeners that they never bother to catch the message: before you end the world with a war first read the silks and satins of prophecy floating in a chill wind.

In the songs that came in this part of the concert Yvonne Barclay was only partially successful. Pity the soprano who must exorcise the haunting power of Schwarzkopf and Welitsch. Not easy ground from which to sing. When Barclay sang Lehar's *Meine Lippen*, the morbidness was missing. (The term morbidness is not exact in this context, though it is the only word which catches the strangeness of songs which mix recollection of the past with the present and gild the lot with a sound exactly commensurate to the collapse of an entire world.) Lehar's music clings to us like the garment of an unwashed skin. In spite of the elegance, it frightens with its beauty.

The "hot lips" waltz is salutary. The merry widow, as given by Barclay, skates merrily but knowingly over the thin ice of the fading empire, the Danube and the entire uneasy edifice of Europe. In her black and purple dresses by Worth, she is an angel of un-earthly annunciation, not just a soprano with a sexy swirl to the voice.

Her best showing of the evening was in the most inspiring song from Lehar's *Paganini*. This music came after the deluge of the 1914 War and its aftermath. It is a poignant cry for help. The party and the deluge are over, but the people are still beautiful and do their best to keep up surfaces. Barclay showed her quality and how — in spite of the lack of big waves of gorgeous tactile tones — she knew the heart of the music and demonstrated it. And this was the heart of the concert. One cannot ask for more.

And then came the decorations. Bye Bye Blue Danube. Our vessel is pulling out from the departure wharf. Another journey gone to the past and another one coming. We can only sink once but the Danube will always be there.

The bright coloured streamers snap in the air from well-wishers on the wharf. Our last contact with the land of yesteryear is gone. And El-Saedi and his band thump out the Strauss *Radetzky March*. The members of the big audience have their moment. They stand to clap as the military rhythms thunder on. Where is the Cairo Opera House? In Vienna or Budapest? And in what era? Is it all to begin again as before? Or...

The applause continues — enjoyment, pleasure, release. Plenty. Enough. Happy New Year.

Art

Exorcising the everyday

There are moments of epiphany. And every moment recorded by Adel El-Siwi in his current exhibition at the Mashrabiya is privileged. There are moments of remembrance (*The Old Song*) and of communication (*Advice*), there are moments of discovery, of dancing, praying, painting and of inspiration. Even the painting that appears on the poster, entitled *Good Morning*, records an explosive, breakfast euphoria.

Given so many moments of intensity it is only to be expected that the paintings should appear less crowded than claustrophobic. Everything is fit to burst. It is not that what lies beyond the frame is intimate, it is simply that what is in the frame does not really fit. Figures hunch to remain in picture, crouch, twist and contort to keep in frame. Perspectives and proportions are modulated by the necessity of keeping burgeoning forms in place.

The atmosphere created should be overheated. That it is not a result of the quality of paint and the manner in which it is applied. Often El-Siwi fabricates an aura of translucence. His painting is at once watery and luminous. Colours slide, one into another, ending often in a sea of grey. Outline is applied later, in charcoal or pastel.

El-Siwi's method of painting mitigates against density. His subjects have little in the way of solidity, and though they are constrained in seemingly small spaces they seem,

Nigel Ryan explores the contents of Adel El-Siwi's transcendent space



Advice, one privileged moment among many

often, in imminent danger of floating away. Apart from the two large 'studies' of faces — *The Victim* and *The Guard* — form is seldom articulated by paint, which is applied, more often than not, as backdrop. Colour, which bleeds, which is made to bleed by dripping water onto the still wet paint, resolves into form only after the drawing of outlines. And the outlines, given the ordering of El-Siwi's method — colour, water, line — are contingent. They hold together, as much as it can be held, a protoplasmic evanescence that is thus made to describe form.

El-Siwi's draughtsmanship can be whimsical, as in *The Heart Thief*, where broken lines delineate two seated figures, one holding (the other's?)

heart. It can be descriptive of detail, as in *Rembrandt and Leonardo*, where the two figures are distinguished only by details of costume. Rembrandt by his complicated Dutch collar and cavalierish hat. Leonardo by his simple, Renaissance décolleté. But it can also complicate the reading of details, as in *The Tracer* — an image reminiscent of Blake — where the crouched human figure is made slightly more complex by a confusing proliferation of limbs.

Line can also be used to create something out of nothing: in *Watching the Sky* it imposes a human figure on what is otherwise a muted colour field. Combined with the fortuitous juxtaposition of colour, and a well chosen title, it acts as post-event rationalisation in

The Smile. In *Daily Dance* this process is reversed, with the actual stuff of the painting beginning to make nothing out of something. Beneath a table lamp of massive proportion and proto-Cubist perspective, the dancing figure performs, looking for all the world like one of those pirouetting dancers found in musical boxes. Only her head disintegrates into nothing more than smears of paint. A little bit of Bacon goes a long, long way.

There is continuity in Adel El-Siwi's work, with many of the paintings in the current show utilising the techniques and themes of earlier exhibitions. *Italia*, a large townscape, appears as an attempt to synthesise those earlier concerns, as the still life intrudes on the cityscape. Perspectives are dis-

torted, allowing the impression of futurist explosion. The solidity of architecture is subverted by a fragmented dynamism — a clue here, perhaps, to the origin of extra limbs. And foregrounded, or foregrounded as much as is possible in such a vortex, two objects from a table top still life sit alone in a space far more ambiguous, if less metaphorically loaded, than a de Chirico piazza.

But if anything can be said to dominate the current exhibition, it is the human form, no matter how dissolute. Strangely, that form proves remarkably difficult to sex unless the most blatant signifiers are on display. The dancer in *Daily Dance* we know is female, not because she is wearing a dress, but because the dress is lifted up in an erotic little can-can. The figure in the *Snakecharmer* is male, because this is a full-frontal pose, and we are invited to speculate on the significance of the relationship between the nude and the snake-charmer's own phallus. The figure in *In the Port* is harder to read. One feels that it must be a sailor, should indeed be a sailor, because there is a ship in the background, a grey mass floating on a deep celestial blue. And then, of course, one notices. The figure is wearing trousers and the androgyny of the torso notwithstanding, is in Coteauque pose. His arm reaches across his thigh. The figure is male, and a sailor to boot. His moment of epiphany is no doubt on its way.

Listings

EXHIBITIONS

General Exhibition
Zamalek Arts Centre, 1 Al-Masrah Al-Suwayti St. Zamalek. Tel 340 8211. Daily exc. Fri, 10am-1pm & 7pm-10pm. Until 5 Jan.

The Egypt of The Past
Italian Cultural Centre, 3 Al-Sheikh Al-Masrafi St. Zamalek. Tel 340 8791. Daily 10am-1.30pm & 3pm-8.30pm. Until 6 Jan.

Photography exhibition of monuments and landscapes from the archives of Alberto Mamodori and the Egyptian Museum of Torino.

Adel El-Siwi (Paintings)
Mashrabiya Gallery, 8 Cham-pollion St. Downtown. Tel 778 623. Daily exc. Fri, 11am-8pm. Until 11 Jan.

Recent works by a leading contemporary artist.

Happy Sunday (Photographs)
French Cultural Centre, Mounira Ameri, 1 Madinet Al-Hoqueq Al-Farasta St. Mounira. Tel 353 3725. Daily exc. Sat, 10am-2pm & 3pm-6pm. Until 11 Jan.

Josef Pollner
Cairo-Barlin Gallery, 17 Youssif Al-Gunduli St. Bab Al-Louq. Tel 393 1764. Daily exc. Sat, 12pm-6pm. Until 14 Jan.

Photographs under the title Egypt, Land Under The Black Sun.

Omar El-Hadi (Photographs)
Lobby of the Jumeirah Center, AUC, Al-Sheikh Riham St. Tel 354 2968. Daily 9am-9pm. Until 15 Jan.

Hassan Ali Ahmed (Paintings)
Espace Gallery, 1 Al-Sharifain St. Downtown. Tel 393 1699. Daily exc. Fri, 10am-2pm & 3pm-8pm. Until 18 Jan.

Abdel-Moumen Mo'awad (Paintings)
Salama Gallery, 36/4 Ahmed Orabi St. Mohandessin. Tel 346 3242. Daily exc. Fri, 10am-2.30pm & 5.30pm-9pm. Until 18 Jan.

Alfred Stieglitz (Photographs)
Sony Gallery, AUC, Al-Sheikh Riham St. Tel 357 5422. Daily exc. Fri & Sat, 9am-12pm & 6pm-9pm. Until 29 Feb.

Stieglitz was the first to take pictures at night and to use cameras in the snow and rain. He was the first to photograph skyscrapers, clouds and airplanes and was one of the pioneers of colour photography.

The Museum of Mr and Mrs Mahamud Khalil

1 Kefour Al-Akhdid St. Dokki. Tel 336 2376. Daily exc. Mon, 10am-6pm.

Egypt's largest collection of nineteenth century European art, assessed by the late Mahamud Khalil, including works by Courbet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Manet and Rodin.

Egyptian Museum
Tel 573 4319. Daily exc. Fri, 9am-4.30pm, 1.30pm-4.30pm.

An outstanding collection of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic treasures and the controversial mummies' room.

Coptic Museum
Mar Girgis, Old Cairo. Tel 362 8766. Daily exc. Fri, 9am-4pm; Fri 9am-11am, 1pm-4pm.

Founded in 1910, the museum houses the finest and largest collection of Coptic art and artefacts in the world.

Islamic Museum
Port Said St. Ahmed Maher St. Bab Al-Khalq. Tel 390 9930/9930 1520. Daily exc. Fri, 9am-4pm; Fri 9am-1.30pm, 3.30pm-6pm.

A vast collection of Islamic arts and crafts including mashrabiya, lustreware ceramics, textiles, woodwork and metalwork; drawn from Egypt's Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods and other countries in the Islamic world.

Museum of Modern Egyptian Art
Opera House Grounds, Giza. Tel 340 6861. Daily exc. Mon, 10am-1pm & 5pm-9pm.

A permanent display of paintings and sculpture showing the modern art movement in Egypt, from its earliest pioneers to latest practitioners.

Mohamed Nagui Museum
Chateau Pyramids, 9 Mahamud Al-Gunduli St. Giza. Tel 340 6861. A museum devoted to the paintings of Mohamed Nagui (1888-1956).

Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum
Tel 342 0598. Daily exc. Sat & Sun, 10am-1.30pm.

A permanent collection of work by the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (d. 1934). Above granite monument to Saad Zaghloul stands near Qasr Al-Nil Bridge.

FILMS
Jeri, Ogi & Dossand (Yesterday, Today And Tomorrow)
Italian Cultural Centre, 3 Al-Sheikh Al-Masrafi St. Zamalek. Tel 340 8791. 9 Jan. 6pm.

Directed by Vittorio de Sica (1963); starring Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni.

French Film
French Cultural Centre, 27 Sabri Abu Alam St. Heliopolis. Tel 417

4824. 7pm.

La Letra (1988), directed by Michel Deville. 7 Jan. Les Misérables, part 1 (1934), directed by Bernard Raymond. 8 Jan. Les Misérables, part II. 9 Jan. Mase Bary (1991), directed by Claude Chabrol. 10 Jan.

Changes change their programmes every Monday. The information provided is valid through to Sunday of which it is wise to check with the cinema.

Nine Months
Cairo Sheraton, Giza St. Giza. Tel 360 6881. Daily 10.30am, 1pm, 3pm, 4pm & 9pm, midnight. Al-Salam, 65 Abdel-Hamid Badawi St. Heliopolis. Tel 293 1072. Daily 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm.

Drop Zone
Karm I, 15 Ennadid St. Downtown. Tel 924 830. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Outbreak
Karm II, as above.

Monkey Trouble
Al-Haram, Al-Haram St. Giza. Tel 3458358. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Waterworld
Metro, 35 Talat Harb St. Downtown. Tel 393 3897. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. Normandy, 31 Al-Haram St. Heliopolis. Tel 258 6254. Daily 12.30pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm. Tahrir, 112 Tahrir St. Dokki. Tel 335 4726. Daily 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Showdown
Radio, 24 Talat Harb St. Downtown. Tel 575 6562. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Invasion of Planet Earth (3-D)
Rivoli I, 26th July St. Downtown. Tel 575 5053. Daily 1pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm.

Jawa (3-D)
Rivoli II, as above.

Danah & Dumber
Cosmos II, 12 Ennadid St. Downtown. Tel 779 537. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

The Man Without A Face
MGM, Kollat Al-Nasr St. Maadi. Tel 332 3066. Daily 6pm & 10pm.

The Santa Clause
Ramada Hilton I, Corniche Al-Nil St. Tel 574 7436. Daily 10.30am, 1.30pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & 9.30pm. MGM, as above. Daily 1pm, 3pm & 6pm.

Braveheart
Ramada Hilton II, as above. Daily 1pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm & midnight. Tiba I, Near City. Tel 262 9407. Daily 10.30am, 1.30pm, 3.30pm & 9.30pm.

Al-Garage (The Garage)
Metro, 35 Talat Harb St. Downtown. Tel 393 3897. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Abu Zeid Zammouh (The Abu Zeid Of His Time)
Tiba II, Near City. Tel 262 9407. Daily 10.30am, 1.30pm, 3.30pm & 9.30pm.

Teywer Al-Zabab (Birds of the Dark)
Diana, 17 Al-Ahli St. Ennadid. Tel 924 727. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Al-Hab Al-Zarof Sa'ha
Cosmos I, 12 Ennadid St. Downtown. Tel 779 537. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm. Ray St. Heliopolis. Tel 258 6344. Daily 10am, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

Eura's Hazzet 'Arab Mier (The Woman Who Shook Egypt's Throne)
Lido, 23 Ennadid St. Downtown. Tel 934 284. Daily 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 6pm & 9pm.

MUSIC
Bella Masquera Opera
Main Hall, Opera House, Giza. Tel 342 0598. 4 Jan. 8pm.

The Choir, Orchestra, and Ballet Troupe of the Opera House perform. Soloists include Hassan Kamel, Walid Karamy, Mona Rifa, Isam Mousa, Carol Eyyar, and Awalet El-Sharawi.

Opera House Orchestra
Main Hall, Opera House, as above. 5 Jan. 8pm.

Pianist Moushira Issa, conducted by Youssif El-Sai.

The Lady Maid
Small Hall, Opera House, as above. 5-6 Jan. 8pm.

Nonne Allouba performs.

Flauto Recital
Main Hall, Opera House, as above. 7 Jan. 8pm.

Soloist Montserrat Caballé performs.

Yehia Khalil
Small Hall, Opera House, as above. 7 Jan. 8pm.

Clarinet Recital
Small Hall, Opera House, as above. Ashraf Attalla performs.

DANCE

Monte Carlo Ballet
Main Hall, Opera House, Giza. Tel 342 0598. 9-13 Jan. 8pm.

THEATRE

A Night From A Thousand Nights
Al-Gomhouriya Theatre. 12 Al-Gomhouriya St. Tel 391 9956. Until 18 Jan. 8pm.

Musical written by Beirani Al-Toni and performed by Yehia El-Fakhama, Angham and Ali El-Hage.

Al-Sagha (The Sorcerer)
George Abiad, Al-Ahram. Tel 579 1776. Daily 9pm.

Al-Gazib (The Clown)
Al-Salam, Qasr Al-Nil St. Tel 335 2484. Daily 9pm.

Bazaar Ya Shaban (With Your Permission, Master)
Al-Farm, Ramzes St. Tel 578 2444. Daily exc. Mon, 9.30pm.

A man pays dearly for running against the president in the election. Play by Mahmoud El-Toukhi, directed by Galal El-Shakawi, starring Ahmed Bader and Nermine El-Fig.

Hazz Nawa'em (Newcomer's Luck)
Al-Housemar, 16 Al-Tor St. Al-Boulaq. Tel 769 233. Daily exc. Tues, 10pm.

Directed by Ramiq El-Bahassaw, starring Dalal Abdel-Aziz, Mahmoud El-Gundi and So'ad Nasr.

Al-Za'im (The Leader)
Al-Haram, Pyramids Road, Giza. Tel 386 3952. Daily exc. Tues, 10pm, Mon & Fri 8pm.

Starring Adel Hani in a play scripted by Farouk Sabi.

Al-Gazib wal Wahab (The Beautiful and the Ugly)
Al-Zamalek, 13 Shagarat Al-Dor St. Al-Zamalek. Tel 341 0660. Daily 10.30pm, exc. Fri & Sat, 8.30pm.

Starring Laila Oloni as the gamely and everyone else as the wretched.

Minas America
Qasr Al-Nil, Qasr Al-Nil St. Tahrir. Tel 575 0761. Daily exc. Tues, 10pm, Mon 8pm.

With Mohamed Sobhi, director and lead actor, in a socio-political allegory written by Mahdi Yousef.

Loosy
Baldwin, Corniche Al-Nil, Agouza. Tel 347 1718. Daily exc. Tues, 9pm.

Musical starring Fayza Kamel, Mohamed El-Helw and Mohamed Nour.

Ya Naa Khassama (Try to Understand, People)
Floating Theatre, Fatma Rashid St. Tel 363 8783. Daily 9.30pm.

Starring Sami Radwan, Dina Abdallah and Hassan Kamel.

Ra's Al-Diwak (Cockered Dance)
Miami, Talat Harb St. Tel 767 086. Daily exc. Tues, 9.30pm.

Starring Sami Radwan, Dina Abdallah and Hassan Kamel.

Bahadur El-Istambal (Bahadur in Istanbul)
Haram, Pyramids Road, Giza. Tel 347 1718. Daily 10pm, Sun 8pm.

Starring Ghannem stars with Elham Shabine in yet another comedy.

La-Bahadur Koda (None of Them)
Al-Hikmat, Ennadid. Tel 991 3697. Daily exc. Wed 10pm, Tues 8.30pm.

Starring Fouzi, Mamdouh Abdel-Ah and Hassan El-Touki.

Hazzam Yaa' (The Me Up...)
Main Hall, Opera House, Maadi. Tel 364 4160. Daily 10pm, Fri 8pm.

A musical involving extensive belly-dancing by Fifi Abdou. Also starring Medhat Saleh and Sherif Mounir.

National Circus
Next to the Ballroom Theatre, Al-Nil St. Corniche Al-Nil, Al-Agouza. Tel 347 0612. Daily exc. Wed, 9pm.

The Dawn Of The Amarna Period
British Council, 192 Al-Nil St. Agouza. Tel 301 0319. 4 Jan. 7pm.

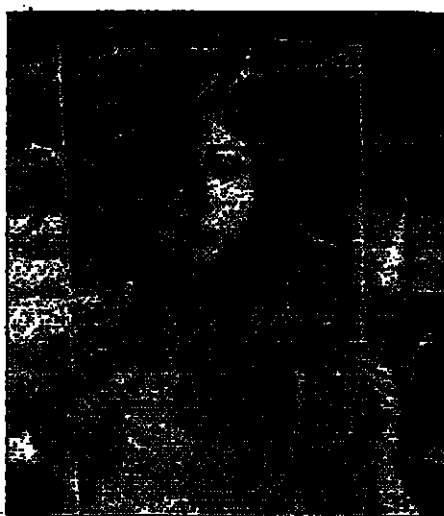
Lecture by Aisha Douda, former tutor, University of London.

All information correct at time of going to press. However, it remains wise to check with venues first, since programmes, dates and times are subject to change at very short notice.

Please telephone or send information to Listings, Al-Ahram Weekly, Giza St. Cairo. Tel 5786064. Fax 5786089/853.

Compiled by Inji El-Kashef

Around the galleries



Wagdi Habash

New year, new writing: hitherto unpublished poems by Mourid Barghouti and a short story by Abdou Gebeir

Six poems

By Mourid Barghouti

Mourid Barghouti is a Palestinian poet, born in Deir Ghassanah on the West Bank in 1944. His latest collection of poems, *Lailah Majnounah* (A Mad Night), appears in Cairo this month. His other collections are: *Al-Toufan wal-Adat al-Taqwin* (Deluge and Regeneration, 1972); *Falastini fil-Shams* (A Palestinian in the Sun, 1974); *Nashid lil-Faqir al-Mousalah* (A Song for Armed Poverty, 1978); *Al-Ard Tanshour Asraraha* (The Earth gives up its Secrets, 1978); *Qas'id al-Rasif* (Poems from the Sidewalks, 1980); *Tal al-Shatat* (Prolonged Diaspora, 1987); *A'ndama Nattaql* (When we Meet, 1992); *Ranat al-Ibra* (A Pin Drop, 1993); and *Qas'id Moukhtarah* (Selected Poems, 1994). The following 6 short poems are from his forthcoming collection: *Man-tiq al-Ka'nat* (The Sense of Things)

Silence
Silence said:
Truth needs no eloquence.
After the death of the horseman
The homebound horse
Says everything
Without saying a thing.

Embrace
Of his grandmother the child said:
In her last days
Death sat in her lap,
She petted him, was loving,
Told him a story
And the two fell asleep at the same moment.

The Drowned Ship
The shipwreck said:
Here at the bottom
Adventurers look for treasure.
The police for the bodies of the dead,
Insurance companies for pretenses;
But I found no one
Looking for the gaps of mariners and passengers,
Their last apprehensions,
When the tempest, like a busy seamstress,
Stayed up late
To sew black clothes
And pile white snow
On the empty half
Of a widow's bed.

The pillow
At the end of the long day
The pillow said:
Only I know the confident man's confusion,
The nun's desire,
The slight quiver in the tyrant's eyelash,
The preacher's obscenity,
The soul's longing
For a warm body where flying sparks
Become a glowing coal.

Only I know
The grandeur of unnoticed little things;
Only I know
The loser's dignity,
The winner's loneliness,
And that stupid coldness one feels
When a wish has been granted.

The stab
The moonlight said:
I am the first of the homeless,
The eternal wanderer;
You find me on the breakwaters,
On the soldier's helmet,
On the false teeth of the party's general
secretary,

In the begging of the willow and in the river's
obstinacy,

On a woman's brow:
When pleasure lifts it;
On the executioner's fingernails and robber's
keyring,

On the dome of parliament protected by its
qualities,

On a deserter's medals,
On the tilted surface of a bomber,
On a knife blade,
Which a friend takes from the front of his cloak
and points at the backbone under your own.
And I,
in my moment of agony,
beg the clouds
'Hide me!'

Prison
Man said:
Blessed are the birds in their cages
for they, at least,
Know the limits of their prison.

Translated by Radwa Ashour



Illustration: Gamil Shafiq

وعلى خولة الغازي
وعلى الأسنان المصنعية لرئيس
العزب.
علي تومل الصمصام وعند النهر.
علي جبين السيدة،
حين تغمري اللذة من أسفل إلي
أعلي.
وعلى أظافر الجلاء وحلقة مفاتيح
العرش.
علي قبة البرلمان اللاتخ بالوصافه،
وعلى أوتيرة الهارب من ميائتيه
وعلى الجانب المائل من قاذفة
القتال،
وعلى الدرج الرخامي
وعلى نصل السكين،
حين ينقله صديقك من صدر
عيايته
إلى العمود الفقري في ظهر
عيايته ...
وأنا
في وجعي الشاقق
أقول: إليها:
خبيثيني، أيتها الغيبة!
المنون
قال ابن آدم:
طوبى للمسافر في هذا القصر
إنها - على الأقل -
تعرف حدود سجنها.

المصمت
قال المصمت
المقاتل لا يحتاج إلى البلاغة.
المصان العائد بعد مصراع فارسي
يقول لنا كل شيء
دون أن يقول أي شيء.

المضن
قال المفيد من جنته:
في أيامها الأخيرة
جلس الموت في حضنتها
فحنت عليه ودلته
وحكت له الحكاية.
وتأما في وقت واحد.

السفينة الفارقة
قال حمام السفينة الفارقة:
هنا، في القاع،
يبعث المغمورون من كئوس.
وتبعث الشرطة من جثث.
وتبعث شركات التأمين عن ثرائع.
ولم أجد من يبعث عن
شهقات البحارة والناس،
وهو أجسم الأخيرة،
عندما كانت العاصفة
بسرورها النشيط
خيالة تفضل الشباب المسود
وتكوم الثلج الأبيض
في النصف الفارغ
من سرير الأرملة.

اللغة
قالت اللغة:
في نهاية اليوم الطويل،
أنا فقط من يعرف أرتباك التواثق
وشهوة الراية،
والرجفة الخفيفة في رموش الطافية
وتهتك الوازع
وتحرق الروح

لجسد ساخن يلطم شرارها المبعثر
في جمرة واحدة
وجلال المنمنمات القليلة الشان
التي تهملونها عادة.
وأنا فقط من يعرف
هيبه الغلس
ووجعة المنتصر
وذلك الإحساس بالبرودة اليكلاه
بعد تحقق الأمنية.

الطبعة
قال جود القمر
أنا المشرذ الأول
والمبعثر الأبدى
تجدني علي كاسحات الأمواج

Plain Talk

Looking through a pamphlet entitled *The Modern Egyptian Press* published in London in the early 1950s, I found the following passage I, wrote about *Al-Ahram* newspaper:

"The best daily paper in Egypt now... is *Al-Ahram*. It has the widest circulation. It is an independent paper as regards local politics, and it consistently presses for social reform. It is a dignified paper, never lending itself to party controversy. It can rightly be regarded as *The Times* in England, an ideal of a national paper."

Now *Al-Ahram* is celebrating 120 years of its existence, I can say that what I wrote about the single newspaper of the 1940s goes for its 13 publications of today.

First published in 1875 in Alexandria by a Syrian, Selim Takla, *Al-Ahram* has played a pioneering role in the development of the press in Egypt. It was started during a time of political instability, and the government permitted it to appear provided that it did not tackle political questions.

One landmark in the history of *Al-Ahram* was the paper's coverage of the Russo-Turkish War, which was its first attempt to reach outside the borders of Egypt. *Al-Ahram* did not confine itself to military affairs, but gave long and general descriptions of Western countries and began to draw comparisons between them and Egypt. It published articles attacking oppression and demanding autonomy. The government then realised that the articles were actually directed against it.

Al-Ahram has continuously engaged men of letters. On its pages writers like El-Aqqad and Taha Hussein published not only literary, but also political and social, articles. Today men of letters contributing to *Al-Ahram* and who have taken it out of the narrow circle of news into the wider field of human interest include Ali Al-Race, Alfred Farag, Naguib Mahfouz, Abdel-Moeti Hegazi, Farouq Gouda and others.

I wonder whether the young Syrian who started *Al-Ahram* 120 years ago would have dreamed that it would grow into such an imposing edifice of journalism with its array of publications and multiple activities of translating, publishing and education.

On this occasion of the 120th birthday of *Al-Ahram*, I would like to extend my wholehearted greetings to its chairman, Ibrahim Nefise, and to all his subalterns who have worked hard to make *Al-Ahram* what it is now.

Mursi Saad El-Din

The Farewell: A crown of grass

By Abdou Gebeir

I was to leave in the morning at about ten o'clock. Perhaps the train would be late, as usual. I felt like leaving even earlier but that was the earliest train. Voices filtered towards me, cocks crowing, donkeys and sheep. From all directions they penetrated the night. Gradually, light grew inside the window-frame, then footsteps approached me.

"Get up, son, take your breakfast."
I didn't know what to say. It might have been 5 or 6am. It was obvious that I was going to have to get up from beneath the covers. What could I say on a morning like this? An ache was exploding inside my head. All night my dreams had been a disturbing series of miniature nightmares between blankets. Now... the *hulba* with milk and the tea. There was a terrible taste in my mouth. Where were my slippers? I could hear my sister's voice. Would I enjoy the journey? I wanted now to sit next to the window and let my spirit wander on the empty land, the fields, small creatures crawling on the thin belt of green, birds landing on the horizon.

Last night my father had asked:
"Have you prepared everything for your trip? Are you ready? Why haven't you said farewell to everyone before now? You must not forget to."

I had been deliberately postponing my farewells for three days. Now I was stuck. I would begin with my aunt, then my grandmother, then the house of my uncles, then our neighbours. All would be present at my departure and one at least was certain to cry. That would be Salwa. Didn't she realise that all of this was nothing but futile play? She took things with such murderous seriousness.

"Haven't you had your breakfast yet? It's getting cold! Can't you move?"

I got up and turned on the old wooden radio to hear the Qur'an being chanted in a sweet, clear voice. Where were my slippers? I was tired of looking for them. I felt weighed down, even dizzy. Then I found them in the usual place.

I opened the window. Cool breezes entered and I felt uplifted. But I quickly became cold and moved away. If the light fell in a certain soft pattern on my high brass bed and its faded coverlets, this place would be like a dream. But it kept reminding me of a room filled with shrouds.

In the bathroom I dipped my fingers into the bowl and splashed my face with cold water. I returned to bed, partially covering myself with the faded eiderdown and sipping my *hulba*, followed by tea and a cigarette.

Time was crawling around me, and the noises increased.

"Boy, are you going to get some *fiul*?"

"No, I'm going to get milk from Um Mohamed."

"Then I'll get the *fiul*, Hosni, Hosni!"

Two people were talking. Beyond my window life went on. Their voices disappeared. My cigarette tasted like salt. Birds chirped loudly, like they chirped once when my father claimed he was about to go mad from the noise. What could I do on this very difficult morning? Would I go out? Should I go out?

My father came and laid down his orders:
"You must see your grandmother immediately."

He gave me money and told me to pass by his shop. His voice was hoarse with tiredness, and I felt his eyes penetrate me like arrows.

I began to dress. My trousers felt smaller and my

socks had holes. My head was throbbing.

Three magazines. These I needed to remember. I could read them one after the other on the train. Or not. I was unable to make any decisions at that moment. Maybe on the train I would just want to listen to the sound of the engines or gaze into the faces of the other passengers. Would that foolish girl meet me?

"Good morning, Fuula!"

"Are you leaving today?"

"Yes."

"OK."

"OK what, Fuula?"

Her face looked tired. But from this whole group my little beast of a sister was the only person I might ever want to talk to in the future. I felt optimistic. Did I know what was happening? Hammer blows, the hammers large as mountains, resounded in the emptiness. I wished I could disappear and tell myself happy, real things in an empty space.

"You'll plunge into life, Abu Zeid, take care!"

This was Uncle Sulaiman. He did not speak much. He protected his secrets. I suspected he would die in my absence. I could read it in his eyes. And then the idea occurred to me.

"Let me go and walk," I said, "around the marketplace."

The sun was rolling down from the east. At the end of the street, children were carrying bowls. And I was slipping away down the alley under windows that had not yet been opened I wanted to go on and keep going on.

"A pretty new teacher came to our class."

"She's stupid! I know geography better than she does!"

"Look out boy, I'll tell her what you said. You are dirty and rude."

Bold voices echoed behind me. Now that I was leaving everything and everything was leaving me, how could I voice my ideas?

The shops were still closed. Manyous Batriyous, the Grocer of Faith, Abdel-Wahab, the Grocer of Sincerity etc. I had memorised those signs. I had grown tired even of myself. I was running. Should I slow down?

The bazaar was still closed, covered and dark. The wind that blew at its heart spoke of selling and buying. Rags dangled from the long roof and wooden doors of the shops. Which makes some happy and others sad. Like life. Then I reached the street by the sea. The casuarina trees spoke of the coming buds. How? And why?

This town that I will leave in a few hours makes you tell a strange tale.

"Tell me please, how long since the train passed?"

I had heard this question so many times, standing on the wooden floor of the station with Kamel, Mamdouh, Salah and the others. We used to go out every evening, walk along the corniche, cross the bridge and smoke. Then we would walk through the trees of the village to the station. None of us went going anywhere, but we used to look at the tourist girls arriving and departing on the trains. And we used to dream. That time, now gone, was the time of dreams.

Now I was going to knock on my grandmother's door.

"Good morning, Nabawiyya. Is my grandmother here?"

She was sitting on her wooden sofa in the long hall. She sat upon her thick blanket with the mouthpiece of a waterpipe in her hand. She did not feel my presence until I touched her shoulder. Then she raised her eyes to me in surprise.

"Who? Abu Zeid?"

"Yes, Grandmother. I'm leaving today."

"What?"

"I am going away."

"Oh! I used to tell your father to go away and work for a while, then return, but he never did. You're a good boy."

I sat with her a few minutes as I contemplated the things around us: the drum hanging on the wall, the rosaries and keys; the doves jumping about in the scaffolding, and the brown dog, Nabawiyya, crouched near the fire turning the coals and preparing the waterpipe. The silence filled the rooms of the house with a hushed voice, like soft wind.

Then I broke free and leapt from the room, taking the stairs in jumps, like I used to do when I would jump and hop for joy. I grasped my aunt's door-handle and knocked on the door with the same lyrical beat I had learned from her teacher son. She appeared, singing the song she always sang, which sounded more like moaning. But now she had added a new verse: "You'll depart and leave us. You'll depart."

I felt that something was moving. She was not like my grandmother sitting on the furry blanket. No. There was something else I couldn't explain. She kissed me until my whole face was wet and I was permeated with her smell. Now I would go to the house of my uncles.

Beyond the heaps of dried dust, the narrow streets, under the palm trees near the old stream, a lone boy was singing in a hurt voice behind a cow. Every few moments someone would bring another cow or donkey and let it drink, then leave in silence. And there, on the outskirts of everything, stood the house of my uncles. How many times had I lain on the branch of the tree, sleeping next to the door? I held a stone and knocked hard. My uncles would be beyond the long corridor which ended in the women's courtyard, and which seemed always to take an age to cross. Maybe they would be walking the cattle, or turning produce over in the courtyard, beneath the tall palm.

I had tried many times to climb that palm, but my dream remained distant, hovering about its cloud like top.

"Hello!" My greeting was answered by the broken, weak voice of my uncle Kamal's wife. She gathered her scarf around her head and led me down the corridor, reciting the following tale:

"Drums beat for fathers and mothers, holy verses are chanted and houses are built. Then blood flows over the bed and the girls burst into song. Then the monotonous beat, from morning to evening, comes and night is followed by day. Bellies grow big, and labour pains come. Then screams that pierce like fire! The blood, the pain, the night lullabies, the rocking of cribs and staying up all those hours. The clothesline! The baths! Then we depart? There — your uncle is in the courtyard."

The wife of another uncle, Abdel-Fattah, met me on the way. She stretched her rough hand out to me

and spoke in a voice that was more like repressed howling.

I opened the door. My uncle Kamal sat in his dirty white trousers sipping hay. He lifted the hay from a heap on his right, then sieved it into a heap on his left. My uncle Ibad's wife was at the end of the courtyard under the umbrella with the scummy shade, standing near an ox. Uncle Kamal greeted me. Uncle Mohamed was hauling a large grain sack onto Uncle Ibad's back.

I sat near Uncle Kamal, who said:

"Walk the way the sea flows. Winds blow from the north towards the south. Always beware when the hay chaff flies. It would be a mistake to sit against the winds."

I don't know why, but then I wished the wind would blow the grass and cover my whole head, so I might embark on my trip wearing a crown of grass. I greeted Uncle Mohamed, and he pressed my hand and smiled. I felt him warning me against taking the advice of his brother too seriously.

"You're going, and..." He worked the wooden machine of his mouth, uttering old words which tasted like red clay. I could study the ropes hanging above or the feet of the cattle, the nests of the doves or the helpless sparrows. Uncle Ibad's head was bowed as he shook his cap. His chest was formidable as a shield and always stirred awe in the boys.

"This is a dangerous young man," he said, shaking my hand with his own, powerful and large. I felt pierced by my surroundings, as if I would almost burst.

Uncle Kamal's wife appeared, muttering, with a brass pot and four glasses on a shining brass tray. I took one of the glasses, sipping my tea, greeting the men one by one, hardly able to focus my eyes. I pressed the hands of my young cousins, giving each a piaster.

I climbed up to the heights of my own home to find the neighbours gathered and the shimmering face of my mother.

My knees felt shaky. I was surrounded by women in dust-covered black. Pale faces were moving, and many hands. Should I stop? Should I stop?

My older cousins had gathered. One held a cigarette. I took it from him, drew a long puff, then returned it.

The horse carriage had arrived outside. My cousins carried my suitcase and trunk. The coachman cracked his whip. We rode to the marketplace and stopped.

My father was sitting on his bench in front of his shop, next to Uncle Saleem. Each leaned on his cane, gazing at the ground. I climbed down, into the arms of Uncle Saleem. Our hug felt artificial. I greeted Boutros the barber and those loitering around his shop, then my father, then I climbed back into the carriage where so many armpits emitted an odour of sweat.

We rode. The corniche, water shining under the sun. Trees sleeping on the shore. The long, friendly thoroughfare, the monotonous beat of hooves. The smell of air laden with musk. I lit a cigarette like the young men around me. Then we travelled a while among the orange groves, the scattered yellow, the long green stretches, the sun and sleepiness. I woke to find myself on the sidewalk at the station.

The train came — the train took me away.

I placed my things on the luggage rack and sat next to the window. Then the train slipped away. The hands at the windows, the planks of the station, disappeared and the fields began.

Faces crowded the carriage, but I could breathe. I took out a cigarette and lit it, puffing out the smoke, staring into the face of the young stranger with a bun haircut. He was a soldier in civilian clothes, heading towards the war. The fields stretched far, retreating behind the mountains, and the birds were like drops of water falling horizontally, the scenery broken only by poles and wires. Sheep stood on a bridge. A man behind them rode a donkey. I could see the grass crown on my uncle's head, the ropes on the walls, the dust and the bends in the road. The faces of women wrapping their black *glibabs* and my sister's small face. The chents, the rasp of the microphone and the long beat of tambourines, the benches covered with cushions, the tables of food, the silence of the plantations, sheep and goats under palm trees, cattle sleeping in the courtyard, the sieve and the brass bed. I could remember the *hulba* with milk, the little children, the young school-teacher, the moon, the bride on her platform, the *henna*, the ululations, the dancing women, the clouds of bullets, the shouts of men, the holding hands together, the packed trunks. The groom would stretch his hand and lift the veil, and she would turn her face away from him. He'd undress himself, then her, placing a money-bag in her hand to make her laugh. He stretches out his hand, undoing her long braids. She leans towards him and he leans toward her, kissing her passionately. She closes her eyes and falls into something like a trance. He plunges into her and she screams. He feels the blood and she trembles. Then he would raise his body, the handkerchief, and the blood. He would also see the *henna*, the *nugut* and the *sha'riya* trays, the mornings, the going and coming, the work. The cattle, the sheep, the pregnancy, the pain, the days and months, then the pain and screams, the baby, the work, the fields, telephone poles, plantations, knocks, and yourself, yourself, yourself, and the face of the soldier, the telephone poles, the fields, the sheep, the carriage, the station, the neighbours, Salwa rushing towards me and clinging, my mother freezing up and my sister shouting, "What's happening?"

The frightened woman retreated a little, but she clung to me until she disappeared.

"Are you a soldier?"

"Yes. I'm a soldier from the Order of the Knights. I've fought twice."

As for me, I'm going off to work for the first time and have never thought of this matter before. But you are a soldier from the Order of the Knights who has fought twice on his horse. How can this be? Certainly after coming out of the war your feelings must be different. How were your feelings when you were in the war?

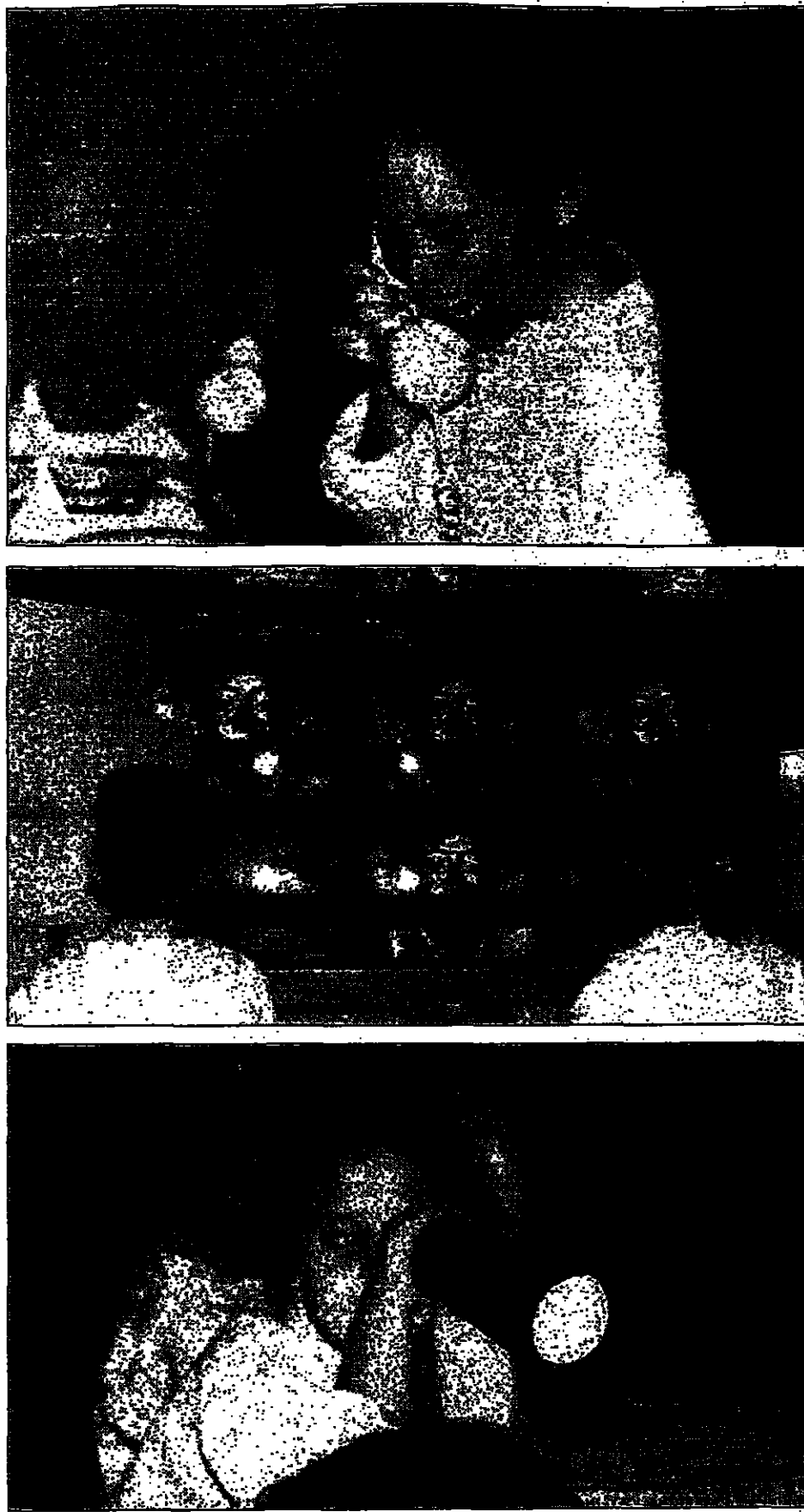
He looked at me and must have intuited my imaginary conversation. I retreated to my corner once more and stared out of the window.

My sister Fuula came and sat near me. She looked thinner than ever and was speaking intermittently. I wanted her to talk so I talked too. We talked together until the train stopped.

Born in 1948, Abdou Gebeir's first published collection of short stories was *Faris Ala Hussan Min Al-Khashab* (A Knight on a Wooden Horse). His most recent publication is the novel *Uttat Radwan* (Radwan's Vacation)



Learning can be fun these children discover on their first visit to the new museum. Here they can ask questions and find the answers without memorising long lessons



photos: Jihan Ammar



Supermarket

As a child, I was never introduced to the joys of shopping at a supermarket. We had our favourite grocer, greengrocer and butcher. We bought our cold cuts from Lappas, our sweets from Groppi. The idea of finding everything under the same roof was not a familiar concept.

The first real supermarket I visited was in Athens, on our way to Australia, a few years after I married. My first encounter with such a place was rather momentous. I was in awe. So was my daughter, barely three at the time. When asked what she wanted she became nearly hysterical. "Everything," she finally said. I understood her frustration. Neither of us had been used to this display of hundreds of brands, of thousands of goods packaged to catch the eye. One felt alien, like travellers in a country where we did not understand the language, strangers: non-consumers who did not "belong".

Observing the shoppers piling boxes, cartons, bottles and sundry objects into their carts at top speed, I wondered: How could they make decisions so quickly?

As soon as I settled into my new home, however, I mastered the art of supermarket shopping. I learned to read labels, compare prices, and distrust advertisements. I made a number of mistakes at first but in no time I was getting maximum value for my money.

Within a few years, though, supermarkets completely lost their appeal. I joined a group of health-conscious mothers who advocated only natural food. We went on expeditions deep into the countryside to buy fruit, vegetables, home-made cheeses and goat's milk. We bought stone-ground flour, oats and wild rice by the sack. We sweetened our home-made desserts with pure honey bought from the little old man who kept bees. I made my own yoghurt and baked brown bread. My kitchen looked every bit like an Egyptian kitchen. There I was, on the other side of the world, chopping greens and hunting for farms whose chickens ranged freely, just to buy a few eggs. Home delivery was out of the question, convenience food anathema and if by chance I gave in to facility and walked into a supermarket, I would look behind me first to make sure none of the other mothers saw me. Back home, I would destroy the tell-tale package.

My children grew up neither more nor less healthy than children who were fed on hamburgers and corn flakes. They were immensely more frustrated, though. They craved soft drinks, sticky sweets, ice cream and potato chips. The home-made varieties simply did not measure up. The problem was compounded by TV advertisements and the sight of brightly illuminated supermarkets and milk bars that beckoned at every street corner. They enthusiastically accepted invitations while their friends visited only reluctantly. My older daughter once came home very excited. She had been invited to lunch at her friend's house to celebrate the arrival of a new baby. "What is so special?" I wanted to know. "You just had a baby sister." She looked at me with all the resentment in the world. "It is not the same thing," she said. "ours was home-made!"

At this point I thought that maybe a happier balance had to be achieved. With a heavy heart I introduced some items carefully selected off the shelves of a "good" supermarket. A few years later we came back to Egypt. Supermarkets had not caught on and for a few years my daughters were reminded of my health drive, but this time there were no temptations lurking around the corner. I felt entirely justified chopping away and feeding the children fresh vegetable soup. But my older daughter harboured an everlasting longing for the trappings of supermarkets. When she married her American husband, she made sure that he had no health hang-ups. Pre-packaged hamburgers were his normal fare, preferably washed down with a bottle of something fizzy and artificially coloured. There was a man after her heart!

When her first baby was born she called to tell me that no matter what, she would bring up her child to be "a normal kid". The baby, I am sad to report, was given soft drinks in her bottle when she was six months old. She practically grew up in a supermarket cart. Strangely enough, at the age of ten, my granddaughter still shows no signs of having been harmed in any way by these practices.

Fayza Hassan

Playing with history

After a tour in Europe and the US in 1992, Mrs Mubarak embarked on a new project that will soon enchant a great number of children, writes **Gihan Shahine**

Queues of children from eight to 15 years old jostle each other and shuffle their feet impatiently, too excited to be quiet. They are about to embark on a journey in time, to ancient Egypt, and in space, down the Nile Valley, across the desert, and down to the bottom of the Red Sea — all in a pre-opening 45-minute tour of the Arab world's first ever high-tech children's museum.

Children are usually passive viewers of cultural artefacts at museums, constantly told never to touch anything, they soon become bored and attention spans are reduced to milliseconds. This is the first time that children are encouraged to participate actively in a cultural experience, welcome to touch, look and play as much as they please.

The museum is Mrs Mubarak's brainchild, conceived after a 1992 tour of Europe and the US. Her aim was to create an attractive, stimulating environment for children, "one in which they will be free, active and confident," in the first lady's words. "We also hope to encourage their participation, encourage them to observe, explore,

touch and relate, to discover new fields of interest, to pose new questions and try to answer them. Above all, we want our children to feel that they are the most important elements in this new museum." In response to Mrs Mubarak's recommendations, the Society for the Development of the Heliopolis Community, which she herself heads, signed an agreement with the Natural History Museum arranging for the supply of the latest technology, equipment, experts and designers in order to duplicate the London Natural History Museum here in Egypt. The museum was erected in Hadeyaq Al-Ghabs, a park in Heliopolis, where the serene environment prepares children for their exciting journey into another world. The society bore all the expenses, which ran to six million pounds.

The new museum is also expected to fill, at least in part, a gap in the education system which emphasises rote learning of vast quantities of material and resorts but little to imagination, creativity, curiosity and understanding. "The museum is probably the first of a series,

as Mrs Mubarak plans to establish another one for science," says Inas Lutfi, head of the museum. "This one took time and effort for both the British crew, who were hardly acquainted with Egyptian history and environment, and the Egyptian historians, artists and architects who were there to help out."

The efforts do not seem to have gone for naught. Once inside, eight flashing screens welcome you with the question: "Who are you?" A simple question, but not necessarily an easy one to answer. "You are a part of Egypt, and Egypt is a part of you" is the reply. The first section provides children with information on ancient Egypt, none of it stuffily academic. You ask a question and press a button to see the answer appear on a screen, or lift a telephone receiver to listen to a story. How many stones is the Khafra Pyramid made of? Make a guess, push the right button, and a small pyramid opens up to reveal the answer.

The second section shows the Nile Valley: you can listen to a Nubian girl talking about her everyday life, or peek into a booth to listen to a Nu-

bian song. Then there is the Bedouin tent where children's eyes and minds can wander through the desert and mingle with the animals at the bottom of a sand dune.

The third section brought squeals of excitement from the children allowed a sneak preview of the museum. There, the count-down had begun for the launching of a make-believe submarine on its long journey to the depths of the Red Sea. Noses were glued to screens for 15 minutes as the children gazed at the different species inhabiting the wonderful watery world and listened to explanations of habitats and feeding habits.

"It is amazing how much information the children assimilate, although there is really a lot to absorb," commented Amany Atef, a tour guide at the museum. "Our main target, however, is to entertain children and develop their imaginative and creative skills. So after their tour, we take them to the activity centre, where they can spend an hour drawing and creating. We also give them questions about some of the things they learned in the museum, and the response is outstanding."

Supra Dayma

Green spinach (I) (Upper Egyptian way)

Ingredients:
2 kilos of fresh green spinach
1 onion (grated)
1 tbsp. of crushed garlic
2 tbsp. of washed rice
1 pint of chicken or meat stock
Salt, pepper
Butter or oil

Method:

Cut all the tips and stems of the spinach and set aside to use in another dish (which I'll tell you about next week). Wash the spinach leaves very well under running water. With the "Mulukheya" chopper, chop the spinach leaves then place them in a strainer inside the water basin and pour over 1 litre of boiling water to get rid of the spinach residue. Leave to cool then press inside the strainer to ensure the spinach is completely drained, set aside. In a cooking pan, fry the onion and garlic gently until tender, (do not brown), stir in the spinach, cover and simmer. As soon as the liquid of the spinach is absorbed pour over the stock and season slightly as spinach retains its own salts. Allow to cook until it thickens, put in the rice, lower the heat and leave to simmer until a thicker consistency is acquired. Serve with rice and chicken.

Moushira Abdel-Malek

Restaurant review

Infrequent visits

Nigel Ryan on irregular dining

Long ago I lived around the corner from Pub 28. It was, to all intents and purposes, my local. I never went. Pub 28 is one of those places that are always there. Everybody knows about it, yet very few people ever seem to go. Last week I did, my fourth visit in as many years.

Nothing ever changes. Pub 28 has always struck me as suffering an identity crisis. It is a cross between a Mediterranean taverna, an English pub of "ye olde" variety, and a western saloon. There are wagon wheels, David Roberts prints, wine racks suspended from the ceiling. On the menu you will find such contemporary anachronisms as chicken in a basket, along with standard restaurant fare — entrecote café de Paris and that kind of thing. Invariably there is a special chalked up on a blackboard, and the special, whenever I have been, has been shish taouk. And Pub 28 is dark. Dark wood, white walls, and lighting as dim as it gets. It is also cool, which in summer is a blessing, in winter less so.

The customers remain as constant as the decor and the menu. It seems to attract, in equal measure, the Zamalek based, middle-aged expatriate and the *infatigable* businessman. It feels faintly boozy and oddly self-satisfied.

I ordered gratinated onion soup followed by Filet Mignon with mustard sauce. The person I was dining with ordered Pub 28 meatballs followed by the ever-present special shish taouk. Soup and meatballs arrived with a basket of warm bread. The soup supported a layer of melted cheese, the meatballs con-

cealed a bed of shredded lettuce. Of the two, the soup was far and away the better. As onion soup goes it was very creditable. In fact, it is one item on the menu that I would wholeheartedly recommend.

The mustard sauce that covered my filet was an ambitious concoction. It was surprisingly frothy, containing, I guess, a quantity of beaten egg white, though the flavour was marred by the use of a particularly vinegary mustard. Beneath the sauce lay two very tender slices of filet that had been cooked rare, as ordered. The shish taouk was a simpler affair, with pieces of chicken interspersed with onion and green pepper. The only thing you can do with a shish taouk is cook it competently and this had been done. Both entrees were served with french fries and vegetables. The latter consisted of carrots and french beans which had begun life in a freezer and ended being overcooked.

All in all the food was competently prepared. The soup was excellent, the meat of good quality, the shish taouk as good as one could hope. Nor was it that expensive. With two soft drinks, followed by two coffees, the bill came to LE75. Good value, standard restaurant fare. The question remains, why does one go so seldom, to somewhere that is in effect dependable and not over priced? 1996 is upon us — and sometimes, almost certainly, I will pay my fifth visit in as many years.

Pub 28, Shagarat Al-Dur, Zamalek (beneath the General Hotel). Tel: 341 0200

Al-Ahram Weekly

Crossword

By Samia Abdennour

ACROSS

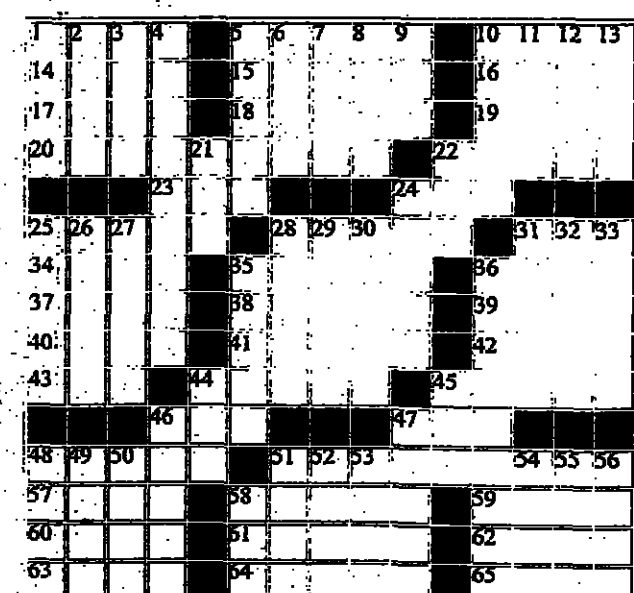
1. Combat as in boxing (4)
5. Precedes room, chair and grease (5)
10. Arrive (4)
14. Theatre seat (4)
15. Beneath (5)
16. Augury (4)
17. Functions (4)
18. Liquor (5)
19. Chain: tie (4)
20. Lodging (9)
22. Egyptian water-lily (5)
23. Guided (3)
24. Blank (3)
25. Residue (5)
28. The Armada (5)
31. Describing some wines (3)
34. Drift (4)
35. Hunger after (5)
36. Photograph; gunfire (4)
37. So be it (4)
38. Stormed (5)
39. Facility (4)
40. Wagon (4)
41. Coarse corundum used for polishing metal or stones (5)
42. Dutch South African (4)
43. An explosive, abb. (3)
44. Mimicry (5)
45. Girdles or belts (5)
46. Cavity (3)
47. ... El Bar (3)
48. Officiate; seat (5)
51. Emphatic (9)
57. Employ (4)
58. Via con Dios (5)
59. Pile, jumbled (4)
60. Revise (4)
61. Town in Massachusetts (5)
62. Number of muses (4)
63. Trust (4)
64. Two hip muscles, ... magnus and parvus (5)
65. Satisfy (4)

DOWN

1. Discredit (4)
2. Affection (4)
3. Times (4)
4. Elastic (5)
5. Receded (5)
6. A province in NW Spain (4)
7. Union of governments, parties, groups to foster a particular interest (4)
8. Discharge (4)
9. Weather directions (3)
10. A computer language (5)
11. Exclude; overlook (4)
12. Order of the day (4)
13. Goals (4)
21. Sanctum (3)
22. Ablaze (3)
24. Destitute (5)
25. Brochure (5)
26. Kind of numerals (5)
27. Ward off (5)
28. Concoct false charge against (5)
29. Type of beer (5)
30. Each single (5)
31. Bedlam (5)
32. Scoot for "resin" (5)
33. Wombs (5)
35. Walked stealthily (5)
36. Plum-like fruit, pl. (9)
44. Broadcast (3)
45. Vehicle (3)
46. Devotion (5)
47. Paper measures (5)
48. Dear, Fr. (4)
49. Disguise (4)
50. Extra seed covering in certain plants (4)
51. Woe is me! (4)
52. Perform alone (4)
53. Tree whose fatty nut yields a vegetable butter (4)
54. Last portions of small intestines (4)
55. Make wine (4)
56. Duelling sword (4)
58. Small viper (3)

CRUISE AIRLINES THIAN
FLAME NATAL HOPE
ALICE THOSE BRIS
NEUTRITY MEET RED
WHIP DOKING MONDO
SOLE PINE BONDED
MODE EMBRY DONE
LAGUILE UREBA USO
INCEPIS SUTATE BEN
INCEPIS LAOS
SAIT VARD GNABED
DAVID LAUGH HOME
GOON ENUSMA KIKIM
SAINNA FITHON NETHS

Last week's solution



10. A computer language (5)
11. Exclude; overlook (4)
12. Order of the day (4)
13. Goals (4)
21. Sanctum (3)
22. Ablaze (3)
24. Destitute (5)
25. Brochure (5)
26. Kind of numerals (5)
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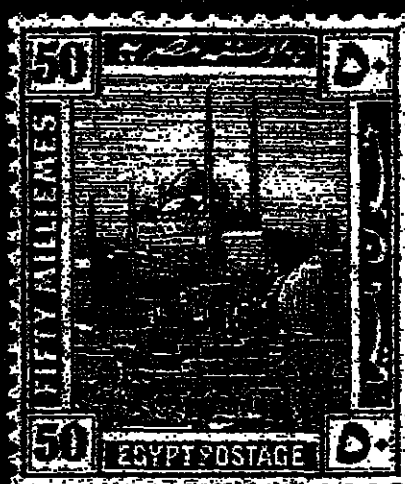
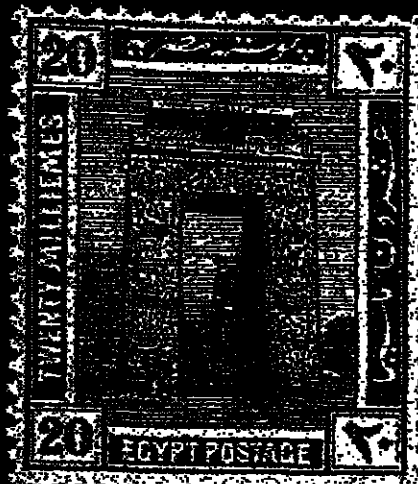
Stamps tell it all

Jasmine Makiad flips through the archives of Egypt's commemorative stamps, marking royal pomp and political victory, from the days of the first postal service established by Khedive Ismail up until the 1952 Revolution



Abolition of the Capitulations issue, 1937.
At the closing session of a conference, which was headed by Mustafa El-Nahas Pasha, the Egyptian Prime Minister, a document was signed with the thirteen-country capitulatory powers to end the Capitulations in Egypt (left: the stamp issued to commemorate this event). The Capitulations were a series of immunities and securities granted to foreigners in Egypt, then considered a Turkish dominion. The document was signed on 8 May 1937, in Montreux, Switzerland.

8 January 1914
Stamps were issued in Arabic and English affirming British dominance in the country. Later that year, 18 December 1914, with the outbreak of the Great War, Egypt was declared a British protectorate.



Evacuation of the Nile Delta by the British troops, 30 March 1947.
In accordance with the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, signed in 1936, the British forces started a plan of withdrawal from Egypt 10 years later, in 1946. This plan excluded the Suez Canal zone. On 9 August 1946, King Farouk hoisted the flag over the Citadel, marking the official withdrawal of British troops from Cairo. The stamp (right) shows King Farouk hoisting the Egyptian flag over the Qasr Al-Nil barracks, now the site of the Nile Hilton hotel in Cairo, in May of the following year.



The Suez Canal Company issue, 8 July 1868.
These stamps (above) were issued for correspondence between Port Said and Suez, which the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez had handled free of charge since 1859. When payment was requested for this service and postage stamps were introduced in July 1868 the public was not receptive. The Egyptian government took over the service in August that year and the stamps were withdrawn from sale and demonetised.



The League of Arab States issue.
These stamps (left) were issued in recognition of the signing of the pact in Cairo, 22 March 1945, which formed the League of Arab States. The stamps, of various denominations, show the flags of the seven founding member countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria) and a flag with Palestine written on it. The flag topped the emblem of the league.

Post-revolution stamps.
After the 23 July revolution, King Farouk I was forced to abdicate and he and his family were exiled three days later. One of the first issues after the revolution (right), was designed to represent the ideals of freedom, hope and peace. This issue includes a woman symbolising Egypt, raising a sword against a background of the old Egyptian flag. Another depicts an olive branch and broken shackles against a backdrop of a rising sun.



Anglo-Egyptian treaty, 1936.
At the final Anglo-Egyptian meeting in the hall of Locarno at the Foreign Office in London, the treaty of alliance between the United Kingdom and the king of Egypt was signed, 26 August 1936. Stamps of different values were issued to commemorate the meeting (left), which was attended on the Egyptian side by Mustafa El-Nahas, Wasfy Boutros Ghali, Makram Ebeid and Ahmed Hamdy Scif El-Nasr, among others.



Stamps with King Farouk's portrait remained on sale until 20 April 1953, shortly before the proclamation of the republic. Afterwards stamps with an overprint (right) began to appear and a decree was issued demonetising portrait stamps that were overprinted.



The first King Farouk I issue.
King Farouk (left) ascended the Egyptian throne at age 17, 29 July 1937, and continued to reign until the revolution.
Other events commemorated on stamps include: the wedding of King Farouk and Queen Farida, January 1938; the international leprosy congress, 1938; the arrival of the Egyptian troops at Gaza, June 1948; the abolition of the mixed courts, October 1949; and the first Mediterranean games, held in Alexandria, October 1951.

Since early pharaonic times Egypt has used a variety of communication means. Water transport once linked inhabitants of the east and west banks of the river Nile; a pony express service, under the Mamlukes, allowed messages to be sent from Cairo to Damascus within days; and carrier pigeons flew messages from the frontiers of the Middle East to Cairo for centuries. Throughout history Egypt has been a communications hub, connecting the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.
In 1862 "Posta Europea", which had been established in Alexandria in the 1830s, signed a 10-year contract for the exclusive right to transport mail in Egypt. Only three years later,

however, Khedive Ismail re-purchased the monopoly on the right to transport mail for the Egyptian government. In 1866 the Khedival Post was established and for the first time in Egypt's history the postal service was to serve general public mail, not just government mail.
Stamps were introduced in Egypt in the very same year — 26 years after the first-ever stamp, the Penny Black, was produced in Great Britain. Historian Maged Farag, also owner of Max Group advertising, recently produced a photo album tracing the story of communication in ancient Egypt and its development through the Persian occupation, the Greek Ptolemaic rule and the Arab and Mamluke rule.

"My books encompass a century and a half of Egypt's history. The enemy of the book today is TV so I have tried to present the material in a compromised way where documentary films and books come together," Farag said. "The main target of this album is not to describe the history of communication or the postal service but instead, through these stamps, to illustrate and document some of the events which took place in Egypt over the past century and a half." he added.
Farag quoted Tzar Nicholas II, the last Tzar of Russia as saying: "Only that country is strong, which cherishes and preserves its heritage."

The man with the golden touch

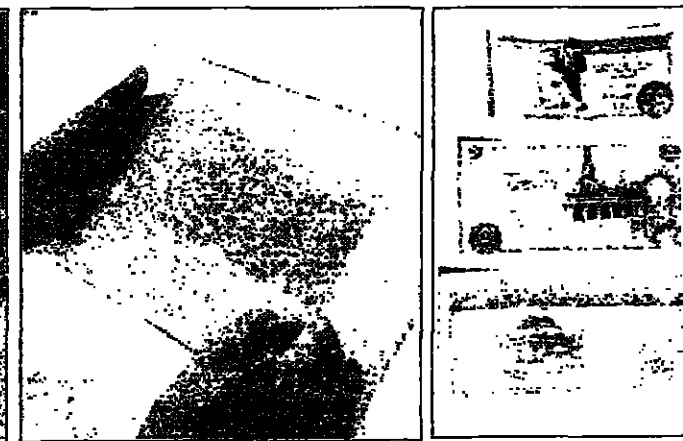
While strolling through the halls of the Egyptian Mail Museum, founded during the reign of King Fouad I to house rare stamps, letters and documents, Egyptian history buffs should make a point of seeking out the display for the first, 100 per cent Egyptian stamp.
Designed in the late 1950s by the noted artist, sculptor and cartoonist in *Al-Mussawwar* magazine, Abbas El-Sheikh, this stamp is the first one issued in Egypt that did not reflect or promote Egypt's old colonial history under the British.
Until 1956, the British had been responsible for the designing and printing of Egyptian stamps and bank notes. But following the 1956 Suez War, the late President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, asserting that these printing initiatives should be a totally Egyptian undertaking, charged the Central Bank of Egypt with printing the currency and stamps.
If the stamp on display in the Mail Museum could be deemed symbolic of an end to a colonial era, then its commissioning, at least for its designer Abbas El-Sheikh, a graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1937, represented the start of a new career through which he left an indelible mark on modern Egyptian history.
While El-Sheikh was highly recommended to Abdel-Nasser due to his fame as an artist, the political significance of the decision to make currency printing a wholly-Egyptian endeavour, made careful selection of the designer of paramount importance.
"Artistically and politically, it was a patriotic and progressive move," El-Sheikh said, discussing the significance of printing the notes in Egypt.
El-Sheikh's skill, however, was more than enough to carry him through a designing test, and he was quickly given the responsibility for designing and painting Egyptian bank notes along with the snappy title, Manager of the Printing Department.

Artist-cartoonist Abbas El-Sheikh made money in a way many would envy: he designed and printed it. Rana Allam talks to the man who pioneered Egypt's modern currency printing industry



For inspiration, El-Sheikh, who is now a professor at Helwan University, capitalised on Egypt's Islamic and Pharaonic history, a tradition proudly reflected in the interior decorating for his house. This bi-cultural tradition was also evident in the design for the new one-pound note. "Islamic designs prevailed on one side of the note while the other featured a scene from Pharaonic Egypt," he said. Egyptians were not the only ones impressed with his new design. In an international competition for bank note designs held in Munich, West Germany, his new note won the first prize among 70 other entries.
Nationalism and patriotism was also the predominant theme in the designs for the new stamps. His first stamps focused on Egypt's accomplishments after the 23 July Revolution which brought Abdel-Nasser to power, the Suez War in 1956 and the merger between Egypt and Syria to form the United Arab Republic in 1958.

"Designing and painting these stamps and notes was a very difficult job," El-Sheikh said. "It required precision, finesse and a steady hand, but it was extremely interesting."
The most difficult aspect about designing these stamps and notes, he stated, was the fact that they were not drawn to scale. The drawings were done under a microscope on a 1:1 scale, which meant that each line had to be as fine and precise as the last. There was no margin for error.
While each bill takes a different amount of work and time, on average, each face takes about three months to complete. "For example, the pound note needs more time to finish than the 25-piastre bill. Even the wood pulp is different for each note," he explained.
Political considerations were not the only motivating factors for the new currency. "Artists took into account that handicapped people also used the money, and as a result, made each bill a different



size so that the blind could easily differentiate between one denomination and the other," said El-Sheikh.
But interesting as the job was, it did take its toll on El-Sheikh and the other trainees and artists to follow him. "Trainees in this line of work generally begin their training at the age of five or six and end their career at the age of 25," he said. "Since the designs have to be accurate down to the millimetre, sharp eyes are necessary. Unfortunately, it really strains the eyes."
It is also an exclusive business, with only five or six artists in the world having done this kind of work. "Compared to these artists and designers, the artisans and craftsmen in Khan El-Khalili are amateurs," he said. "This kind of precision and skill is just not found anymore."
Aside from the physical toll exacted by the job, El-Sheikh was also obliged to make several personal sacrifices. "I had to spend weeks locked in a

small room, with minimal contact with people," he recalled. "But being alone was not what bothered me. It was the fact that I was always followed by security personnel."
El-Sheikh was one of a select few with intimate knowledge of the currency designs, colours used for the notes and the consistency of the wood pulp used in the notes. "In my mind I held the secrets for how to manufacture the money — secrets that could bring down the economy (if misused)," he said. "Each bill required a specific colour and pulp. Only I knew the exact mixtures." But while he never had a run-in with unsavoury characters and was never searched when travelling, he complained that "my outings were limited, and I was not allowed (by the government) to go to some places."
To guard against counterfeiting, each bill was marked with a "water mark" in a white space left on the bill. In addition, an insoluble metal line is added. While the paint could be washed off, the line would remain. "In contrast to modern notes which are all printed on the same kind of paper, use the same colours and have fixed designs, these bills could not be forged easily," El-Sheikh stressed.
The advent of the computer age, however, has rendered El-Sheikh's kind of skill obsolete. The designs for stamps and bank notes are done on computer, and the printing process, which was once considered an art, is now an industry.
"The quality of the bank notes and stamps printed is deteriorating," said El-Sheikh, "because the artist who used to supervise the design has now been replaced by an administrator."
"I may not know a great deal about computers," he added, "but I know that art is a form of creating, not copying. In this light, computers fall painfully short off the mark."

Edited by Fouad El-Gawhary



Basking in winter sunshine in Sinai and touring Upper Egyptian monuments in mild weather are two of Egypt's many attractions

photos: Khaled El-Fiqi

Selling tourism

Every year millions of Europeans make their way to the islands of Mediterranean islands of Majorca, Ibiza, Corfu and Cyprus, not to mention the coastal resorts of Morocco, Tunisia, Greece and southern Turkey. Over 52 million tourists went to Spain in 1995.

The coastal resorts of Morocco and Tunis also did a thriving business. Tunisia fulfilled its annual expectation of four million visitors. Turkey welcomes 8.2 million annually and has set a goal of 17 million by the year 2000. And even the tiny island of Cyprus, with limited archaeological and architectural attractions, receives over two million annually.

Yet Egypt, which arguably has better and bigger beaches, more tourist attractions in terms of history and culture, a wider variety of destinations, and a more congenial year-round climate, is lagging far behind. Even in its tourist heyday, 1992, it could boast of a goal of no more than four million tourists. There is no doubt that Egypt's tourist trade has picked up since the recent slump, but optimists should remember that statistics are not always a reflection of the true picture. The increase in the number of tourists this year was partly the result of extremely tempting all-in deals offered by travel agencies abroad. Tourists flew directly from Europe to destinations on the Red Sea or in Luxor and, according to reports by guides and agents, seldom took in other sites.

There is no doubt that Egypt has a lot of competition — many countries are trying to capture a share of the global tourist market; perhaps some have a better product, in terms of providing what the market is seeking.

When dealing with the tourist industry, we have to ask: What do tourists want and is Egypt giving it to them? Let us look at patterns of national behaviour in an effort to find an answer.

Egypt's traditional tourist product is historical monuments and this, according to tour guides, is what French travellers want. Yet their numbers are relatively small: 85,747 between January and September 1995, compared with 215,785 from Germany and 185,444 from Italy.

Japanese and Koreans are also interested in

What do tourists really want? The travel page staff undertake a nation by nation investigation, and, as **Jill Kamil** reports, find different answers

Egypt's heritage. They also have a reputation as big spenders among traders, who compete for their custom. They also tend to travel in groups, and want to take in as much, as quickly, as possible.

Germany is Egypt's largest market, according to statistics for the period of January to September 1995. Tamer Seif, a tour operator responsible for German groups, cites Egypt's main attractions for Germans as "sunny beaches and facilities for deep sea diving and water sports".

He said that a German tourist spends an average of 21 days in Egypt, "five of them at the seaside, the others divided between archaeological and safari trips. They often fly from the Red Sea to Cairo for a couple of days to see the pyramids and the Egyptian Museum." As far as Egypt is concerned, this is an ideal arrangement: holidays with both sun and culture.

Italians also love sun and sea. According to Marco del Panta, the press attaché at the Italian Embassy in Cairo, "Sharm Al-Sheikh is a relatively new destination for Italians. Most of them go to the Hilton Hotel in Hurgada, which has contacts with a major tour operator in Italy."

Abdallah Ibrahim, a tour operator who deals with Italian groups, explained that many Italians switched their allegiance to Egypt from Turkey, following bombings there in 1993. While, like the Germans, they tend to make the Red Sea their main destination, they are less likely to take a domestic flight to Cairo or Luxor. "They are too expensive," said Ibrahim, who added that the average Italian tourist finds relaxing on a beach far more enjoyable than visiting ancient monuments; any sightseeing is likely to be undertaken from the comfort of a Nile cruiser.

Spaniards want something else again. "The average Spanish tourist spends from 8 to 15 days in Egypt," said Ali Ghoneim, a travel agency owner

and manager. He added that 90 per cent of most Spanish tourists' time was spent on the classical tour of Cairo, Luxor and Aswan. "They love sea and sun, but they get that in their own country," said Ghoneim. "Good beaches are only a fringe benefit for them. The Spanish are not beach tourists outside their own country."

Meanwhile, the British, in the words of Michael Stock, who served with the British Embassy in Cairo for three years and is a frequent traveller to Egypt, tend to be "geared to a Mediterranean holiday". And, Stock suggests, "Egypt does not satisfy their requirements. They are looking for the best-value holiday in terms of weather, sea and beach, healthy food and clean, comfortable accommodation. They mostly travel with their families, and want to have a good time, which in their minds includes a choice of bars, cafes, restaurants, places where people can listen to music and find junk food outlets."

In his view the only place in Egypt which can satisfy these demands is Sharm Al-Sheikh, which, he said, has priced itself out of the market for the average British family. "Most of the hotels are too expensive, and the others are overbooked." He also stressed the nature of the British tourist trade, with its emphasis on package holidays. Most people, he said, go to their own travel agent in Britain, study brochures, and "book a holiday" many months in advance.

With British visitors to Spain reaching nine million in 1994, with an additional 3,300,000 advance bookings for the period up to the following July, can Egypt ever hope to provide a market like this with what it wants at prices it can afford?

To increase tourist flow in Turkey — which regularly receives over eight million tourists annually — the strategy has been to "use the price as a tool", according to Nazif Ezkemen, undersecretary at the Turkish Ministry of Tourism. He believes that while

his country has reaped the benefits of being easier to access from Europe, the fact that it offers competitive prices has been more important in boosting numbers. Efforts are also being made to diversify the Turkish industry, by improving winter sports, health tourism and "new areas for Turkish traditional tourism".

However, rather than direct competition with neighbouring countries, Ezkemen is keen to promote regional cooperation. "What we need, as eastern Mediterranean countries," he said, "is promotional cooperation, because a new market is growing fast and the countries in the eastern Mediterranean, including Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, need to compete with the markets of the western Mediterranean, notably Italy, Spain and Portugal. This," he added, "was the concept behind the establishment of the Middle Eastern Mediterranean Tourist Association (MEMTA) — to market the eastern Mediterranean countries as a package."

But, according to the Israeli press attaché in Cairo, Yacoub Sety, MEMTA agreements have been signed, but so far nothing has been done to sell the region as a package, although he said that Egypt and Israel were in "close cooperation".

Tourism is a multi-million dollar industry that needs to provide diverse facilities catering for various tastes, from the "family holiday" to the cultural tour, encouraging different kinds of visitors to come to Egypt and stay longer — and to return year after year. Considerable steps towards diversification have already been taken in Egypt, with the promotion of conference, recreational and sports tourism, which in the latter case has included the organisation of successful surfing, fishing, diving and horse and camel festivals. Egypt is already "sold" as far as historical sites are concerned. No one can do better. Let us now continue to recognise the considerable competition from other countries, research the markets and develop our facilities in such a way as to turn ourselves into real rivals.

Additional reporting by **Nervine El-Aref** and **Omaysma Abdel-Latif**

Carving out a fair share

In an exclusive interview, Minister of Tourism **Mamdouh El-Beltagi**, told **Rehab Saad** about his vision of the future for Egypt's tourism



Egypt does not get its fair share of international tourism. Despite its incomparable monuments, mild climate and quality beaches, it is still definitely a minority destination. These are facts that Minister of Tourism Mamdouh El-Beltagi is willing to acknowledge as he works towards the tourist industry's development and diversification.

"We cannot compare ourselves to the big Mediterranean tourist destinations because of two major obstacles," said Beltagi. One is what he terms the "lack of general awareness in Egypt of the importance of the tourist industry", in other words, Egyptians are not always treating tourists right. He believes that this factor often influences the choice of would-be visitors and is something which needs to be quickly remedied.

"We are already showing a series of 'awareness' adverts on TV to show the general public the right way to deal with tourists," said Beltagi, "and the school-curricula has been extended to include studies on tourism-related subjects". While well aware that this is a long-term project, Beltagi feels confident it will pay off in the future and lead to growth in the industry.

Another reason Beltagi cites for Egypt's small share of the tourist market is lack of promotion in the international media. While recent campaigns have proved successful, Egypt was late to jump on the bandwagon. "Spain, on the other hand has been promoting itself for decades," he said.

Sheer proximity is another reason tourists choose Spain and Greece over Egypt, according to Beltagi. Holidaymakers from northern Europe are simply able to drive to their destinations. Travellers coming to Egypt, on the other hand, "have to book a flight, and go through all the pangs of travelling to a distant destination".

He is also concerned that Egypt is losing out in the popularity stakes because visitors, particularly in the Red Sea area, are being forced to stay within their tourist villages because of a lack of public facilities outside. He has, he said, been aware of this problem for a long time. "I have met investors in Red Sea projects and pointed out the importance of linking tourist villages by a promenade along the beach." Plans were already being made for this, he said, and the Ministry of Tourism was prepared to foot the bill. In addition, the fences surrounding villages will be removed, and facilities built between the villages, enabling the tourists to wander around freely, enjoying public facilities.

He was also conscious of the need to develop "downtown" projects. "European visitors are energetic," he stressed. "They like to swim, dive, go on safari trips, have lunch in a restaurant, and so on. So instead of building new villages, I am encouraging investors to provide more opportunities within towns."

In Hurgada, for example, there is a traditional fishing village which I feel could be modernised to become a tourist attraction, with fish restaurants, cafeterias and coffee shops.

This year Egypt is considering introducing facilities geared to foreign tourists on the Mediterranean coast. "We've just begun to think about it this year," said Beltagi. So far, some Russians have come to the area, and plans are in action to attract Italians and Germans, especially to Alamein.

Turning to the question of regional tourism and cooperation between the countries of the eastern Mediterranean, Beltagi stressed that their relationship should be "complementary rather than competitive", but was keen to point out that in his mind Egypt was number one in the region.

"Every country has its own attractions. No other country has a Pharaonic heritage; that is exclusive to Egypt. Even our recreational tourism is diverse, since the coral reefs offshore in Sinai offer a different underwater experience from deep-sea diving off Hurgada. Egypt's position as a destination for regional tourism is an additional attraction, but it will never be an alternative."

Nevertheless, Beltagi sees the advantages of package tourism combining more than one destination. "Greece asked us to promote our respective countries in a single package; tourists could visit Greece in the winter and then come to the Red Sea. Turkey also wanted to develop regional cooperation, and I can see advantages in this too," he said.

Egypt's target for the year 2000 is 6.3 million tourists, according to Beltagi. But could Egypt absorb this number? He affirmed that it could. "We have allocated 100 projects since 1984 over an area of 39 million square metres and at a cost of LE8.7 billion. These new projects will increase our capacity by 53,000 rooms and 106,000 beds. The present total capacity throughout the country is 126,000 beds."

EGYPT AIR

Telephone numbers of EGYPT AIR offices in governorates:

Abu Simbel Sales Office:	324836-324735
Alexandria Offices: Ramli:	4833357-482778
Gleem:	586461-586543
Airport Office:	4218464-4227888-4282837-4281989
Aswan Office:	315004/1/2/3/4
Airport Office:	488387-488568
Assiut Office:	323151-322711-324000-329487
Mansoura Office:	363778-363733
Hurgada Office:	443591/4
Airport Office:	442883-443597
Ismailia Office:	328937-221958-221951/2-328936
Luxor Office:	388584/1/2/3/4
Airport Office:	38856/7/8
Luxor Office Karnak:	382360
Marsa Matruh Office:	934398
Menoufia Office (Sheikh El Koun):	233382-233523-233522
New Valley Office:	088/901095
Port Said Office:	224129-222878-228921
Port Said Office Karnak:	238833-239970
Sharm El Sheikh Office:	680314-680489
Airport Office:	680488
Taba Office:	063/530010-530011
Direct:	5783620
Tanta Office:	311750/311780
Zakazik Office:	349829-349830/1

Complementary lines

The art of life

Jarostaw Dobrowolski sketches the sanctuary of the Sultan Barquq complex, which **Helen Miles** finds is still a cool place to retreat from the mid-day sun

Each Islamic monument has its own way of trapping the mid-day light. The towering walls of the Sultan Barquq complex, sketched here, slice through it like wire through cheese, cleanly and coolly, depositing sharp wedges of sun which pierce the open spaces without reaching the shaded recesses.

Contrasts between light and shade, between straight lines and soft curves, are a constant refrain in this monument, which might be intimidating were it not for the way the geometry enhances the subtleties of the decorative details, as a table edge does in a still life. The vertical of the minaret is offset by the swirl of the dome; the uncompromising scale of the courtyard is broken by the wooden fripperies on the eaves of the central fountain.

Designed as a school and *khanqah* (Sufi residence), the complex was begun in the 14th century by Barquq, a Circassian, who seized power during the Mamluke era in 1382. It still possesses an atmosphere of scholarly retreat although its benefactor was too busy with a series of bloodthirsty coups and counter-coups to have time for contemplative pursuits.

It is entered by a vaulted passage which ends in an open court paved with black and white marble and porphyry shapes like an enormous children's board game. Four doors at each corner of the court lead upstairs to the rooms once used by the theological students. The sanctuary at one end, drawn here, features four porphyry columns crafted in Pharaonic times from rock quarried in the Red Sea mountains; a stone pulpit donated by Qait Bey, and a high painted wooden ceiling which catches the light like mica glimpsed beneath running water. There is also a domed chamber off the courtyard containing the tomb of Barquq's daughter, Fatima, richly decorated and illuminated by restored stained glass windows. Although still functioning as a mosque, the building is little used. A black and white cat, its markings reminiscent of the interlocking patterns over the *mihrab*, has the place virtually to itself.

The building is on the left of Al-Muazz Liddin Al-Ish Street in Islamic Cairo as you come from Al-Azhar Street, just past the Qalawon complex.



Ahli volleys to the top

The 7th African Volleyball Winner's Cup drew to a close last week in the Ahli Club with the host team walking away with a clean sweep. **Abdel Anwar** was there

Hard work and determination, the stuff of champions, paid off for Ahli's women's and men's volleyball teams, allowing them to break the serves and block the advance of other teams, and win the 7th African Volleyball Winner's Cup last week.

In a series of fast-paced and well played matches, the women's team smashed their way through Egypt's Zamalek team, Algeria's Bejaia and Mouloudia teams and Tunisia's Helal, winning all their matches 3-0. Helal took second place, Bejaia, third and Zamalek fourth.

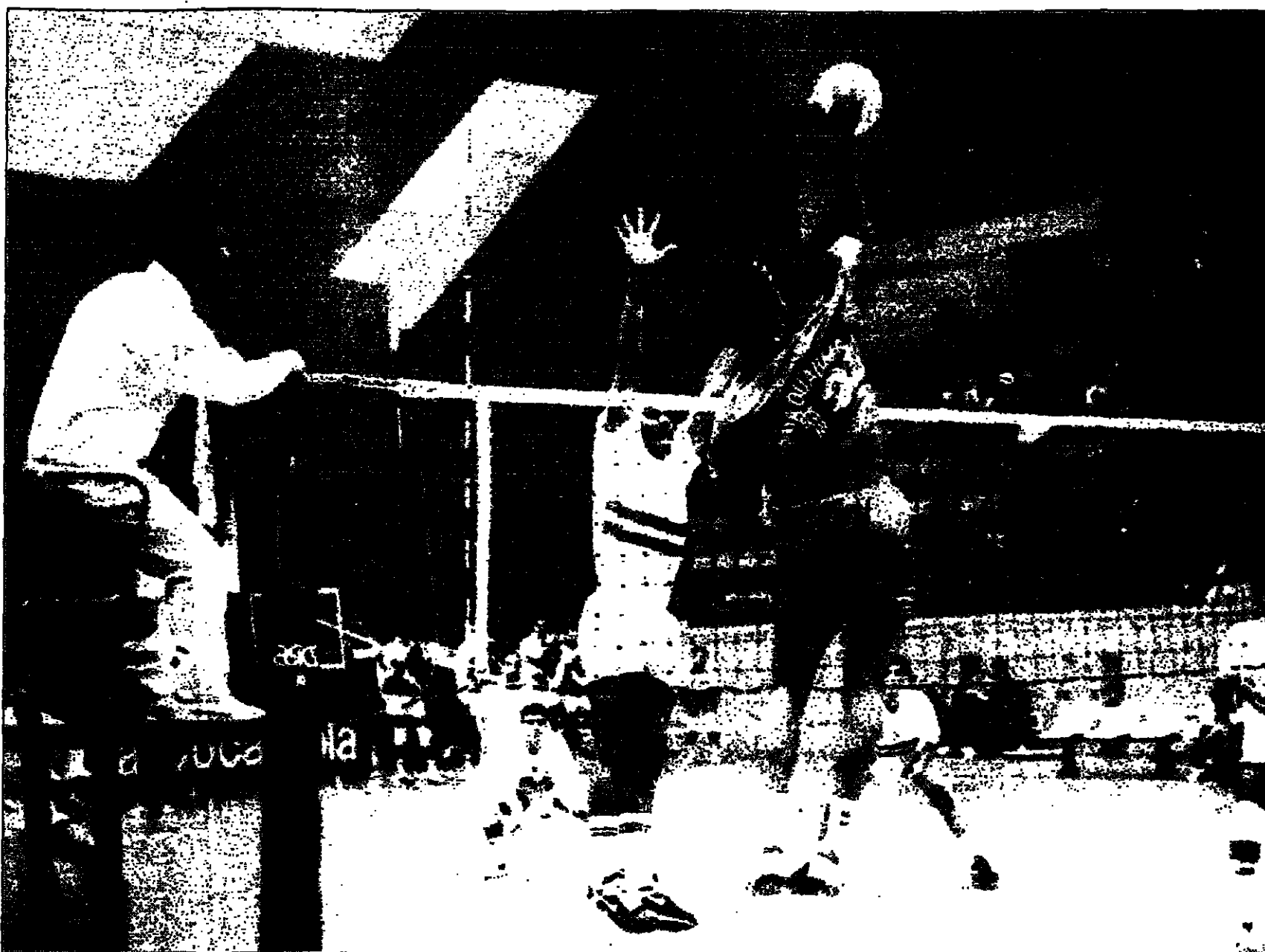
In the men's competition, six teams, including Ahli and Zamalek competed for the cup. For the Ahli men, the pressure was on to snatch the trophy away from three-time title holder, Algeria's Olympic Media. In a run-up to the show down between the two arch rivals, Ahli took on Algeria's Mouloudia and defeated them 3-0. Olympic Media met with a similar fate, succumbing to Ahli's powerful serves and volleys, to lose the match 3-1. The winning streak, however, was temporarily interrupted when Ahli lost to Tunisia's Al-Negm Al-Sahely 1-3. And with Zamalek so far undefeated in the tournament, the loss cost Ahli tremendous face.

To negate the damage, Ahli coach Ibrahim Fakhr-Eddin assumed the guise of a cyber-kid, and plotted Zamalek's performance the next day against Olympic Media. Using a series of complicated al-

gorithms and permutations, or maybe some common sense, Fakhr-Eddin devised a game plan against Zamalek which paid off. In the match against Ahli, Zamalek's players were too cocky for their own good, and received a thorough 3-0 loss to Ahli. Even the cheers of the fans and the drum beats that reverberated throughout Ahli's indoor court were ineffective in slowing down the Ahli onslaught. Ahli was also aided by some foolish player substitutions made by Zamalek coach Gaber Abdel-A'li at some inopportune moments.

Amid much fanfare and hoopla, Ahli's Tahani Tossan was named best female player. Helal's Bia ben Hassouna was named best playmaker. Ahli's Mona Abdel-Karim was best blocker. The Ahli men also earned some kudos. Maged Mustafa was named best player and Mohamed Meslihi won the best server award.

In related news, following the National Olympic Committee's decision to stand firm and ban the national volleyball team from competing in the Atlanta Olympics, the entire board of directors resigned their positions. Supreme Council for Youth and Sports Head, Abdel-Moneim Emara, appointed another board headed by Amr El-wani, a former international volleyball player and an Ahli Club volleyball official. The new board will temporarily run the show until a new board is elected after the Olympics in July.



Zamalek's guaranteed victory turned into an unexpected defeat against Ahli

photo: Salah Ibrahim

Not so gently, down the Nile

As history comes full circle, says **Naswa Abdel-Tawab**, the 24th Annual Nile International Rowing Race draws to a close in Cairo and Luxor

Sailing down the Nile in Upper Egypt, with the temples and monuments of Luxor, centuries-old sentries bordering the banks of the river, one is consumed by a sense of timelessness, as if drawn into a world where history and the present meet as one. There is a continuity that prevails, unspoiled by the hotels and the markings of urbanisation, one often reflected in folkloric festivals or in the re-enactment of Pharaonic ceremonies and competitions.

The Annual Nile Rowing Festival, which drew to a close last week, is just one such event. Some 3,500 years ago, in 1500 BC, the Pharaoh Akhenaten held the predecessor to this race, the first Festival of Oars. As with many ancient rites, rituals and ceremonies, the main object of the 2,000m race, which begins on the Nile, by Luxor Temple and ends at the Temple of Karnak, is not merely to win but to win in order to receive the pharaoh's blessing. Once the racers had reached the Temple of Karnak, and the winners determined, they would take their boats out of the water, and run through the Ram's Pas-

sage to the Sacred Lake in Karnak. There, the winners would celebrate their victory and receive Akhenaten's blessings.

Although the race gradually died along with Pharaonic civilisation, it was revived in 1971 with some minor modifications — the blessings of the pharaohs were replaced by sponsorship from the Egyptian Rowing Federation (ERF). At first, the race was staged using only Egyptian teams, but the ERF quickly added another measure of prestige, and expanded the competition by inviting crew teams from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This move helped attract a number of other famous teams.

In 1975, the ERF moved that year's race to Ismailia to commemorate the opening of the Suez Canal, and in 1982, it took on an international dimension. It was expanded from one race to eight, and in 1988, was included on the list of events in the International Rowing Calendar.

With Luxor and Cairo as the sites for the race, this year 86 invitations were sent to the International Rowing Federa-

tion, and 30 to foreign clubs. Eight teams, representing Germany, the US, Slovakia and Hungary, plus three from Egyptian clubs, participated in a total of 17 juniors and seniors races.

While the Egyptian rowers captured an overall first place, winning eight medals, the competition from the German and American rowers in the scull and skiff competitions was stiff. Germany's Landes Ruderverband topped the rankings in the double scull and skiff events. Germany's performance was aided by the fact that three out of four of the German rowers in this event are on the national team.

The US was also no easy hurdle to overcome in the skiff competition. Egypt's Ali Ibrahim had his work cut out for him as he sought to defeat an American rower, but in the end, managed to pull ahead. As part of his preparations for the Atlanta Olympics, Ibrahim will be in a closed camp for three months. He will then move on to Italy, Belgium, France and Switzerland for training and competitions before finally departing for Atlanta.

Discreetly defeated

A 2-1 Ghanaian victory over Egypt confirmed that Krol's team still has wrinkles to iron out, writes **Eric Asomugha**

Impressive as it was, Egypt's fancy footwork and strong teamwork was not enough to hold off the Ghanaian onslaught in last Friday's friendly soccer match. Ghana came from behind in the second half to steal the show 2-1.

At first, the strategy implemented by the Egyptian team's Dutch coach Ruud Krol, strengthening the defence, seemed to work. But attempts by Egypt to break the 1-1 tie in the last 15 minutes of the match pushed the defensive line out of position and allowed what would have been a wild shot by the Ghanaians to become a goal.

Seemingly more composed than in the Four-Nation's Cup outing, the Egyptian team began the match with their best foot forward. In what appeared to be textbook perfect defensive soccer, the mid-fielders fed the ball to the offensive line and fell back to support the defence. By the seventh minute of the match, the Ghanaian side was besieged. Ahmed El-Kass, true to form, cut across the field, deftly received a pass from Ali Maher and powered a right drive into the net.

With both teams tightening up their formation, Egypt again took the initiative.

Best intentions, however, often fall short of the mark, and so was the case for the Egyptian team. While El-Kass nearly drilled a rebounding ball home again after a weak shot by Ali Maher, his shot was wide, as were a half dozen other shots.

In the early minutes of the second half, with Egypt still playing the offensive, Ghana, unable to penetrate through the Egyptian defense, was forced to resort to long-range shots. Their first break, however, came when Krol substituted right-winger Ahmed Hassan and team captain, El-Kass. While it probably wasn't the best time to make sure that everyone got to play, for Ghana, these substitutions were a godsend. In a 30th minute equalizer, Sam Johnson nudged an in-flight volley by Ali Ibrahim. From there on, the tempo of the match was punctuated by sporadic attacks by both sides. But a wild shot by Ghana's Mallam Yahya in the 90th minute of the second half took the Egyptian defence by surprise and gave Ghana a 2-1 win, and its second victory over Egypt in the span of four years.

For Krol and the Egyptian Football Federation, the outcome of the game was no

real surprise. Realising that the team still has a long way to go in terms of honing up its weak defence, Krol viewed this match as a learning experience and an experiment.

"I wasn't interested in the outcome of the match against Ghana as much as I was in the outcome of the African Nations Cup," said Krol. "This match was just a training session in preparation for playing the best teams in Africa. It was a testing ground for the team's physical and technical strength."

Although the match was forecast as an easy victory for Egypt, clearly, the Ghanaian team proved to be more powerful than expected. In addition to skilful maneuvering by Ghana, the odds were also stacked against Egypt due to several injuries suffered by team members in the last few weeks. With one week to go before the match, Krol was scrambling to find replacements for Sami Shishini, Hani Ramzy, Ayman Mansour, Hazem Ibrahim and Dawoud Nasser, all of whom warmed the bench during the game. The replacements were drawn off the rosters of local league teams.

Sports minister cries foul

A cry of foul play spilled forth from Abdel-Moneim Emara, pitting the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports against the Arab Football Federation. **Amira Ibrahim** reports

The spirit of good sportsmanship flew out the window following the conclusion of the Arab Football Super Cup, which was hosted by Saudi Arabia from 18-23 December, when Supreme Council for Youth and Sports' (SCYS) head, Abdel-Moneim Emara expressed his opposition to Egyptian teams hence forth participating in Arab championships.

The source of the confrontation between Emara and Saudi Prince, Faisal bin Fahd, head of the Arab Football Federation (AFF) stems from statements made by Emara that the AFF had set a trap

for Egypt's champion football team, Ahli. Emara, along with some other critics and sports officials criticised the new system created by the AFF, whereby two additional Saudi teams were allowed to participate in the Super Cup championship, bringing the number of Saudi teams participating in the championship to three. The competition is usually held between two teams only.

Emara and other critics also contend that Ahli fell victim to biased refereeing and subsequently lost the match against Saudi Itihad 1-0 and Al-Shabab, 2-1. But even though Ahli defeated Saudi

champion, Al-Hilal, Al-Shabab won the cup due to Ahli's only victory. Until Al-Hilal lost to Ahli, they were favoured to win the cup. In short, critics maintain, Ahli was set up.

Within hours Prince Fahd, in a press conference, voiced his outrage at Emara's allegations, and demanded clarification as to whether the statements were Emara's personal views on Arab competitions or indicative of Egypt's national view on the issue. "If he really meant what he said, which I doubt," said Fahd, "then Egypt's sports programme will be the real loser."

Nevertheless, added Fahd, "Arab sports will continue, with or without Egypt's participation."

There were those in Egypt, however, who felt that Emara's statements may have been more an expression of his frustration.

However, members of the allegedly defrauded team, Ahli, did not take the loss as hard as Emara. "It's not the end of the world to lose," said Ibrahim El-Mo'alin, an Ahli board member and head of the Ahli delegation to the Super Cup. "We may have lost the cup, but we played well enough to earn the respect of Arab sports of-

ficials and fans."

As a representative of one of the teams which will lose out if Emara has his way, El-Mo'alin stressed, "You can't recapture the lead if you run away. That would be tantamount to defeatism." While there is truth in his message, El-Mo'alin is also working to promote his own hidden agenda. The Ahli and Zamalek clubs are currently competing for the right to organise the Arab League Champions Cup in December, 1996. Withdrawal from Arab competitions would essentially shoot down Ahli's bid to organise the tournament.



Handballers go north: A long voyage is in the stars for the Egyptian national handball team which will be competing in the four nations Spanish International Handball Tournament, set to begin in Spain on 7 January. Over the course of three days, the team will play three matches.

The first, on Friday, will be against Norway. The second match, scheduled for Saturday, will be against Denmark, and the third match, on Sunday, will be against host country, Spain. The winner of the tourna-

ment will be determined based on points. From sunny Spain the team will then leave for snowy Sweden on 9 January, for the 1996 World Cup. The competition will involve the eight best handball teams in the world, based on the results of the last world championship held in Iceland in May.

Along with Egypt, France, Croatia, Sweden, Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia and Switzerland will be vying for the gold. The competition will be divided into two groups, with Egypt playing in group two against Croatia, Germany and Russia.

Al-Ahram
Lebdo

En vente tous les mercredis

- ◆ H d'Or 1995
Khachaba joueur de l'année
- ◆ Assemblée du peuple
L'immunité parlementaire en examen
- ◆ Le président de l'Organisme des marchés financiers
1996 sera l'année des obligations



- ◆ Reportage sur la vendetta en Haute-Egypte
Une tradition bien vivante
- ◆ Les chaînes de Mohamed Salmawy
La société en représentation

Rédacteur en Chef
Exécutif
Mohamed Salmawy

Président
et Rédacteur en Chef
Ibrahim Nafie



From left, clockwise: Farid El-Atrash, photographed at home; Van Leo the sometime surrealist, dressing down to dress up; Taha Hussein, humanitarian liberal as stage prop; Miss Bee Greenwald, South African entertainer and wartime habitué of Van Leo's perfect world of glamour and Shadi Abdel-Salam, director of *Al-Mumayya*. Below, Van Leo and camera

Van Leo: Lighting the subject

Life and theatre. For half a century Van Leo has mixed the two

A young boy peers over the railings of a liner as it sails across the Bosphorus. It is some time in the early twenties. Istanbul, fading into the late afternoon light reflected from the sea, is no more substantial than a stage set. The city is a mere trick of the light. There is a smell of salt in the air. A lock of hair falls across the boy's forehead and... click, a picture.

But Van Leo is someone else, too. He is the son of Armenian parents and they are leaving Turkey to make a new life in Egypt. The First World War is almost certainly over, though to ask Van Leo his age would be less pertinent than unkind. And click, another kind of picture, though not one Van Leo would take.

Van Leo is not his only name, though it has been his name for almost half a century. Before he began taking pictures he was Leon Boyadjian. By 1941 his prints were signed Studio Angelo. Only in 1947 did Van Leo appear.

"You need," Van Leo told me, "to have your photograph taken at least once every ten years, just so that you know how you looked." It is a remarkable conceit from a man who takes pictures that do not even purport to show how you look. He pores over negatives, taken on the widest possible film — this, he says, he now has to import, depending on the kindness of friends arriving from Europe — recasting the images his camera has caught. Lines he does not like are removed, shadows accentuated. The print is cropped, parts of the body removed, consigned to oblivion. He is no caricaturist, no taker of snapshots. Nor should it be assumed that he is interested in capturing something of his subject. His photographs have nothing to do with documentation, save in the imposition of clear outlines. They have nothing to do with photo-journalism. They have everything to do with glamour. And Van Leo understands the nature of glamour. He knows that it is prefaced on the essential not-there-ness of the subject.

There are articles on Van Leo in which attempts are made to define his quality as something that it is not. In this very paper his process of working was once described so: "To take possession of the light and the shadows and make them play on a face which only then would begin to give itself away... this disposition of the self is the first prerequisite of an art which then reclaims the features of a face, the reflections of a buried soul."

Only in a Van Leo portrait nothing is given away. The face signifies nothing, and after Van Leo has got his hands on it can hardly be said even to resemble itself.

Van Leo does not view the face as the repository of anything so ineffable as the soul. He does not allow his portraits to harden into ideas. If they speak of anything it is of a thing as insubstantial as sensibility. They speak of a sensibility that is the photographer's own.

Take his most widely known image. There is nothing human or even compassionate in Van Leo's image of Taha Hussein, celebrated humanitarian liberal; there is nothing ministerial in Van Leo's portrait of the one-time minister of education; nothing controversial in his portrait of Egypt's most famously banned writer. Van Leo's picture is, quite simply, theatrical. To say this is not to denigrate Van Leo's achievement. His, after all, has become the most iconic representation of Hussein.

Van Leo still uses the camera his father bought him in 1941. It is a huge contraption, made of wood, brass and leather, out of which Van Leo has contrived to make a livelihood ever since. It is a career, of course, that has had its ups and downs. A one-time student at the American University in Cairo, he abandoned his studies to become an apprentice at Studio Venus in Qasr Al-Nil. During the early years of the Second World War he set himself up in his father's apartment, developing his photographs in the bath. By 1947 he was in a position to purchase Studio Metro, on Rue Fouad, from a "third rate Armenian photographer who after the war decided to go to the Soviet Union". From Studio Metro Van Leo worked deals with the Opera House, and with the large number of theatres then in existence. He would take photographs for their programme in exchange for a little free advertising. And he has remained on Rue Fouad ever since, though the street has itself changed names.

"To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up," it is certainly a pose after which Van Leo has never strived. The photograph by himself that he likes most is of a South African dancer, Teddy Lane, who lived in Cairo during the 1940s. Lane's face is covered with vaseline and then coated with sand. The body of the dancer is absent — the face emerges from a black background, luminous and far from human.

Today a sitting with Van Leo can easily take more than three hours. There can be no hint of the spontaneous, and nothing is left to chance. For Teddy Lane it must have taken much, much longer, as vaseline and make up were applied, sand sprinkled across his face, his body concealed in a black bag with only a hole for the head.

Lane's portrait becomes the vehicle for Van Leo's own aestheticism. And it is an aestheticism that has less to do with the natural than it has with telling something about the subject. Van Leo measures the success of his photographs only in terms of artifice, of stylisation. Which is why Lane's picture is his favourite. Which is why Taha Hussein was such a perfect subject — the portrait was, Van Leo says, the result of only two poses. This is not surprising, for what better model could Van Leo want than a blind man who chooses always to wear dark glasses? What else could he want

from a model other than his not knowing what he looks like, let alone how he might wish to look?

Van Leo is short and, to use an unfashionable word, dapper. He has the air of an aging cour-turier. He is groomed according to the standards of another age. His manners are slightly precious. You would not dream of asking his age, you could not contemplate arguing with him. He is more than happy to show you the vast number of prints stored in one of several rooms. He would be less happy answering personal questions. Like his photographs, his manner brooks no inquiry. Surface is everything. To pry would be ill-mannered. He is, to use another old-fashioned term, shy.

Certain things he will tell. The entrance to his studio was designed by a close friend, An-

dré de Riz, a founding member of Art and Liberty, an association of surrealist artists. Indeed, Van Leo has himself been associated with the group, and one of the earliest analyses of his work was in Jacques Octavia's essay *Surrealism de l'esprit*. It dealt with the Van Leo who shaved his head, and created a series of multi-portraits refracted endlessly, superimposed one on the other. It is a multiple image of someone who has dressed down to dress up, who has shaved his head all the better to show what he is not. For someone so conscious of appearances, for someone who fetishises the glamorous and the well-groomed, the film star and the movie queen as Van Leo does, what more appropriate form of self-mutilation than to hack at your own hair? It is this, and no more, that constitutes Van Leo the sometime surrealist: it is a question of dressing up, of not just looking strange but looking unnatural.

And it is this quality of the unnatural that distinguishes Van Leo's work. Partly this was a matter of luck. The young Leon Boyadjian had always been in love with Hollywood, with the stills of silent and then talking film stars that would be pinned outside cinemas or else reproduced in fanzines. His association with the Opera House and with Cairo's many theatres and cabarets allowed him to produce portraits in a similar vein, of singers, dancers, actors, actresses. And then his business boomed. It was Cairo, during the war, and people flooded to his studio; the British army physical trainer who wanted exaggerated, he-mannish, body beautiful photographs; countless numbers of dancers, singers and cabaret artists who performed in nightclubs across the city; the housewife from Heliopolis who insisted on 18 photographs, the first posed as she wore 18 garments of clothing, the series ending when she had removed them all.

"Why would she want such photographs?" he asks, rather disingenuously. "Perhaps," he suggests, "a lover was leaving." But he knows why she wanted the pictures, because he understands Being-as-Playing-a-Role. He comprehends the simple, endlessly complex metaphor of life as theatre.

To emphasise style is to slight content, which is why it is so pointless to look for the character of Van Leo's sitters. It also means that the images are themselves depoliticised, or at least ap-

litical. The nostalgia that can be attributed to images of beautiful people, in beautiful clothes staring vacantly into space, is exclusively the spectators' nostalgia. Real life, pre and post any revolution, is simply not like that. The fact that these are black and white photographs does not lend veracity to nostalgia. And of all of us Van Leo is the most disengaged. He has taken refuge behind the camera, and it is Van Leo who undertakes the intricate labours, the hand colouring, the touching of negatives, the painting out of any blemish, any unsatisfactory shadow or line that might prevent the image from fitting his perfect world.

Van Leo, it is true, regrets that there is no longer any real demand for the images he creates. In the seventies he caved in slightly, and began taking coloured snapshots for ID cards. He has off-loaded many of his best prints to the International Museum of Photography in Lausanne.

A little silly, perhaps, he announces that colour film marked the death of the photograph. Ignore the melodrama and he is making a point — the great democracy of the ID card can produce nothing to match the best of his "portraits". The great democracy of the ID card lacks all glamour. It is too ordinary. There is no room for the extravagant, for artifice, for style. There is certainly no room for the boy a lock of whose hair has just fallen over his eyes as he peers over the railings of a liner that has just left Istanbul, taking him and his family to a new life. Van Leo... click, one picture.

Van Leo remains devoted to glamour, to black and white images of a perfect world. And he still takes portraits, revealing not how his subjects appear but how, at some time, they might want to have appeared. He does not do colour portraits anymore.

Profile by Nigel Ryan

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Pack of cards

by Madame Sosostri

♥ Out with the old year, dears, and in with the new. While most of us have probably tried, tried and tried again, and then given up on following our new year resolutions through, some of us are still very obviously still living the blur that was last Sunday night and Monday morning. Oh well. In the words of the legendary Eurovision Song Contest winner Johnny Logan, "What's another year?" For some, it's a time of renewal and revival; for others, it's just a hazy transition from one day to the next. But there's no doubt about it, dears. For all of us, it's at least three days of writing the wrong date, and then having to correct it. Happy new year, dears, and may all your wishes come true.

♦ Mohamed Salmawy's latest play, I hear, is really good. When I finally got round to seeing *Al-Gazir* at the Salam Theatre a few evenings ago, little did I

imagine that there would be an extra surprise in store. Just before the curtain rose, the cast, including Abdel-Moneim Madbouli, Magda El-Khatib, Wad Nour, along with playwright Mohamed Salmawy and director Galal El-Sharawi came out onto the stage with a huge and delicious-looking cake. Judging by the blush on his face, it was obvious that the birthday boy was sweet Abdel-Moneim Madbouli himself. Both the cast and audience wished him a happy birthday (and many more); and once the clapping and cheers had died down, we were treated to a great performance dealing with the rather weighty issues of militant terrorism and fundamentalism.

